

MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

CONVENT

on

STYX



GLADYS MITCHELL

CONVENT ON STYX

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CONVENT ON STYX

GLADYS MITCHELL

 THOMAS & MERCER

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Preface

“Convents are always news, George,” Gladys Mitchell’s detective heroine Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley observes to her chauffeur in an earlier convent-set novel, *St. Peter’s Finger* (1938). They certainly provide a rewarding environment for a murder mystery, as many writers have found—one where the normal values of a secular society do not apply, and where the contrast between the godly atmosphere and the evil happenings can be strongly pointed. Convents, by virtue of their celibate all-female population as much as their alien religion, have always fascinated and repelled the English public in equal measure: as Dame Beatrice remarks in that same novel, “People nearly always exaggerate when they write or talk about convents.” But she—and her author, neither of them members of the Faith—treat such communities with quiet respect and acceptance of their values and customs, though never pretending to share or even understand them. Though parody is a common feature of Mitchell’s literary style, it is never present in this context.

By profession a teacher, Gladys Mitchell churned out over 80 novels during break times at school. Her work depicts the leisured, serviced world of the “Golden Era” of detective fiction, but in a way that often turns the conventions on its head. Justice, for Mitchell, was rarely about bringing the killer to the gallows, as it was for Agatha Christie; it was more about doing the right thing in the circumstances—so the killer might sometimes go free. The supernatural might play a part. Many of her books reflect

the working world with which she was familiar—the closed community of the all-female school or college—in which victims and suspects are often women, as, of course, is her detective. But just as she avoided the prurient English fascination with the man-free community, so too she rejected the usual feminine stereotypes. Dame Beatrice is no mild-mannered Miss Marple, no beautiful, troubled Harriet Vane, but an ugly, elderly, formidable professional woman, whose training and experience as a forensic psychiatrist license an unconventional approach to unravelling the motives and mechanics of crime. Her schoolmistresses—and, here, her nuns—are all individuals, their vocations and occupations helping to form their personalities, but not to define them. Her novels are, in short, as much about characters in a setting as they are about plot and mystery (though there is plenty of these).

Convent on Styx bears all the characteristics of her style. A late work, it is unconventionally structured: the detective does not appear until 100 pages into the novel, and the murder does not take place till somewhat later. Part 1 consists of a leisurely introduction to the lives of the various personnel of the convent and the school and their reactions to some disturbing, but not over-serious, occurrences. The murder, when it comes, seems almost incidental—as indeed it is, in the context of the wider plot. Mitchell gives a detailed account of the organisation, routines, and personalities of the convent and its school, accurately capturing their ethos and priorities as well as the nuns' responses to the Vatican Council reforms to convent structures, statuses, and religious dress. It is fascinating to compare the changes in convent life since she wrote about it in *St. Peter's Finger* 37 years before and to note that, for many of the nuns, the changes were neither welcome nor easily accommodated. But Mitchell does not simply tell what the differences are, or let us observe them through her detective's eyes; she reveals all through the inner

reflections of her individual nun characters, offering through this apparently insider's view (though of course Mitchell was not an insider) a stream of historical data on social change as rich as any set of real-life interviews.

The work of the school is given equal emphasis, again with reference to changing social and educational norms, and here the insider's knowledge is quite evident. Sister Mary Hilary is a modern, forward-looking headmistress of the type Mitchell clearly favoured, here given a worldly background—as a militant feminist, very current in the 1970s!—to demonstrate her suitability for her current role at the interface between the religious world of the convent and the secular one of educational management—as well, perhaps, as an indicator of the strength of her vocation. Every teacher in the school is delineated as to appearance and personality, and given a past (complete with grievances and prejudices) almost entirely uncovered through dialogue with Dame Beatrice. Of course there is a structural reason for this ploy—we have to meet and assess all the suspects—but the effect is to recreate a living, working community of a kind that is instantly recognisable and believable.

The superstitious note that introduces the investigation in Part 2—“My thumbs are pricking,” said Laura to Dame Beatrice—sets the scene for the appearance of most, if not all, of the classic hallmarks of the series. Mitchell's interest in history, archaeology, and literature, as well as in psychology and the occult, comes to the fore here; and if there is less focus on games and physical education than is usual in her work, this may be because the book was written when the author was 74. Indeed, it is distinctly an older person's work with its insights into the mental and physical lives of its ageing detective, the older nuns, and the elderly paying guests at the convent. This gives it a gentle, reflective character less evident in her earlier work. Dame Beatrice herself is less abrasive than usual, less inclined to cackle and be likened to a crocodile (though she still has a

“yellow claw”). She solves the mystery by her usual process of interview and deduction but then, at the relevant moment, displays unwonted physical prowess by avoiding the murderer’s lethal blow. “More quickly than seemed possible in such an old and apparently frail woman, Dame Beatrice skipped from her chair and overturned it in front of his legs just as the inspector and his sergeant burst in at the door.” What an inspiration for us older woman readers! So the physical training skills are there after all. It is hard to imagine Miss Marple (or even Poirot) demonstrating such nimbleness.

Gladys Maude Winifred Mitchell (1901–83) wrote over 60 detective novels starring Mrs. (later Dame) Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, but she also produced mysteries and historical fiction under masculine pen names, short stories and collaborative work, and eight children’s books. This last group included a career novel, *On Your Marks* (1954), about a physical education training college, and a quartet of stories featuring an indomitable schoolgirl detective, Pam Stewart, whose exploits parallel those of her American contemporary Nancy Drew. As one of those rare authors who crossed the literary divide, writing girls’ school stories that were also detective stories, and detective novels that were also about girls’ schools, she stands out, for few writers have produced such characterful, intelligent, and original works in what are often decried as hackneyed genres.

Rosemary Auchmuty
London 2009

PART ONE

*

CONVENT

CHAPTER 1

The Companions of the Poor

“Let us put on concord, being humble in mind, disciplined, keeping ourselves from gossip and slander, being justified by work, not words.”

St. Clement of Rome

Sister Mary Wolstan paused for a moment in front of the Community mirror in the hall. She needed to make certain that her veil was on straight and that she was not showing too much hair over her forehead. What a difference the Recommendations had made, she thought, to all previous conceptions of what the religious habit was to look like. The younger nuns might be grateful to the Second Vatican Council which, among other and, doubtless, far more important matters, had decreed a considerable modification in the dress of the religious Orders, but many of the older nuns, herself included, remained slightly dismayed by the changes.

When, nearly forty years previously, she had been promoted from postulancy to the novitiate and from the novitiate to first and then final profession as a member of the sisterhood which called itself the Companions of the Poor, the habit she had worn had concealed everything about her except her eyes, nose, mouth, and the toe-caps of her flat-heeled, stout, black shoes; but nowadays gone were the great starched collar, the forehead-chafing headband,

the black-headed pins that kept the veil in place, the becoming wimple which, in mediaeval fashion, hid both hair and ears. Gone was the toe-length gown with its flowing lines of honest, hardwearing cream serge, its generous thirteenth-century dignity and gracefulness.

Nowadays only the scapular, like the surcoat of a mediaeval knight, and the soldierly leather belt, with its looped-up rosary and crucifix, remained in sad and noble memory of august and bygone days. The present habit, made of white nylon which was easy to wash, dripped itself dry, and did not need to be ironed, was skimpy and so short that it displayed several undignified inches of white woollen or nylon stocking.

The veil, white for the novices, black for the fully professed, no longer needed pins to keep it in place. It was now made secure by a narrow band of elastic, and hair which had once been closely cropped was allowed to stray over the forehead in what Sister Wolstan considered to be a worldly, almost a frivolous fashion, hardly a crowning glory, it was true, but a nuisance and an embarrassment which made the Community mirror a necessary adjunct to convent life.

"Ichabod!" thought Sister Mary Wolstan, squinting resentfully at her reflection and putting down her briefcase in order to tuck back a straying strand. "The glory has departed."

She picked up the heavy case and prepared to walk over to school, where she acted as secretary to the headmistress, Sister Mary Hilary. In the convent itself she was senior to Sister Hilary and preceded her into chapel, but in school she was her underling and general dogsbody. She checked and unpacked the stock, took down Sister Hilary's letters in the shorthand she had so laboriously acquired, typed them out, and presented them for scrutiny and signature. She kept records and made out rotas, and acted as a buffer state between the headmistress and casual

visitors or parents who came up to complain. In addition to all this, she was expected to render first-aid to children who had chopped or bruised their thumbs during a craft lesson, sustained a fall or a knock at games, or burnt or scalded a finger in the cookery class.

In the old days when dowries brought to the convent were bigger and new entrants into the religious life more numerous, a secular had been employed to undertake the tasks that now fell to Sister Wolstan's lot; but now the dowries, when they came, were small and what had once been a spate of postulants had dwindled to little more than a trickle. The employment of Sister Wolstan saved money; that was the long and short of it. Sister Wolstan did not receive a salary. The convent fed, clothed, housed, and warmed her and would do so until the end of her life unless she were released from her vows, but that was all the recompense—or so the world would say—she received for the loss of her freedom and the negation of her right to earn.

Sister Wolstan had no real quarrel with her lot. Long enough ago she had renounced the world (although one still had to live in it), the flesh (although one still had to eat, drink, sleep, and wash), and the devil (although Sister Wolstan sometimes thought that it must be easier to oust him from a reformatory than from a convent) and she was prepared to be humble and meek, offering her meekness and her humility (and the rheumatism that had begun to trouble her) upon the same altar on which so many years ago she had laid her vows of poverty and chastity and her vow of obedience to her superiors.

What she did mind, though she had never consciously formulated the thought, let alone voiced it, was having to be subservient for eight hours a day to Sister Mary Hilary. Somehow, she felt, it was unsuitable that she should find herself in this position. For one thing, Sister Hilary was a convert to the Faith and had not entered religion until she

was turned thirty. In her unregenerate days she had led protest marches, obstructed the police, and had stood out for women's rights in a militant, aggressive, troublemaking manner that had resulted in a most disagreeable blaze of newspaper publicity and a threat of dismissal from her teaching post. Unfortunately, (although Sister Wolstan always did her best to suppress this uncharitable adverb), once she had sown her wild oats and settled down, Sister Hilary had turned out to be first class at her job and after not more than six years in religion had been appointed headmistress of the convent school and, during the eight years of her reign, had almost trebled the numbers and had achieved that most desirable goal for a fee-paying institution, a waiting list of would-be entrants. As the convent depended upon the school for a considerable portion of its income, the appointment of Sister Mary Hilary appeared to be fully justified.

Sister Wolstan had another cause for feeling aggrieved, though she did her best to suppress it. In the old days, that is to say before Sister Hilary's appointment as headmistress, Sister Wolstan had been sent for training to a Commercial College where she learned typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping so that the school could offer an elementary course called Commercial Studies. Sister Wolstan, returning to the school with her hardly-acquired certificates, had actually taught these subjects and felt great satisfaction in doing so.

With the advent of the new regime eight years previously, however, the Commercial Studies course had been dropped, and, with it, Sister Wolstan's status in the school had declined.

"The girls who want that sort of thing would do far better at a polytechnic," said Sister Hilary. "The merely basic stuff they learn here won't be to them the least bit of good in getting the sort of job they want. It's a something and a nothing, Sister, as I'm sure you will be the first to

admit. I want to run the school on academic and cultural lines. If our kind of education depends upon anything, it depends upon snob-value, and you don't get that by teaching elementary shorthand and the rudiments of how to operate a typewriter."

So the Commercial Studies had gone down the drain and Sister Wolstan had gone from a well-ordered classroom to the secretary's poky little office next to the school front door. There was another thing, too, that Sister Wolstan did not like. Before Sister Hilary took over the reins, the Community had employed a sufficient number of resident teachers to work a small boarding establishment, and now, in addition to Sister Wolstan and Sisters Romuald, Fabian, Honorius, Elphege, and Leo, there were still secular teachers on the staff, though they were no longer resident. There was Nancy Webb, who took physical education and coached the games; there was Petrella Grey, the dance and drama instructress; and there was Frances Fennell, the remedials teacher, who took on what were known in the staffroom as "the backwards" and to themselves and their parents as "the special advantage group."

These women seculars might all have been bearable, though, in her secret heart, Sister Wolstan despised seculars as a spoilt, undisciplined, self-seeking, lax majority, but the women secular teachers formed only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. What Sister Wolstan found hard to accept was the presence of men on the teaching staff. True, like the women, they were visitors only, coming each morning and returning home at night; true, they were of the same sex as Father MacNicol, the parish priest and the nuns' confessor; true, they seemed gentlemanly and unobtrusive enough, but Sister Wolstan did not trust them. In her opinion they had no place in the school and should have taken no part in educating growing girls.

It was all very well for Sister Mary Hilary to laugh at these prejudices and call them hidebound, out of date, and

reactionary, and to assert that in her pre-convent days she herself had been on the mixed staff of a large comprehensive school. Sister Wolstan knew that men were wolves and she trembled to think of tender ewe lambs being taught mathematics, physics, chemistry, and (worse than these) simple woodwork, by men. The woodwork lessons even took place in a building detached from the main school and situated far out on the field beyond any but the most spasmodic and cursory form of supervision and inspection.

There was, however, one compensatory clause in the scroll of Sister Mary Wolstan's disappointments, frustrations, and fears. Her position as secretary made her a go-between of a sort. She formed a link between the staffroom and the headmistress's room, the staff and the parents, the staff and the children, even between the headmistress and, in a sense, the outside world. In other words, nothing went on in the school, or was in any way connected with it, of which she had no cognisance. She might not know all, but she knew more than most people, of such inner workings as there are bound to be in any institution, especially one as sensitive and vulnerable as a private, fee-paying girls' school, and, although she was discreet, she enjoyed the sense of power that intimate knowledge of the various tides, currents, and cross-currents was almost bound to provide.

To reach the school Sister Wolstan first had to skirt the convent car-park. The only vehicle in it at the moment was the convent car itself. As it was Monday, one of the three days in the week when Father MacNicol served Mass in the nuns' chapel and then was given his breakfast in the convent refectory, Sister Mary Romuald was already in the driver's seat ready to take him back to the presbytery. She was dispensed from attending school Assembly on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for this special purpose.

Sister Romuald was twenty-six years old and of astonishing beauty. Wistfully remembering the days when, wearing the old, majestic habit, the nuns were regarded

with awe in the village and with great respect in the nearest town, whereas nowadays they were jostled by unheeding crowds, had to wait their turn in the shops, and were compelled to queue up in the bank and the post office like everybody else, Sister Wolstan sometimes felt tempted to cast a jaundiced eye upon Sister Romuald, who suffered none of these aggravations. Moreover, Sister Romuald could execute U-turns in the main road of the town and even reverse halfway up a one-way street which she had entered from the forbidden end, all this under the very nose of Police Constable Sean Duffy, without exciting rebuke or even mild comment from that susceptible, admiring (and, of course, Catholic) copper.

However, as Sister Wolstan was compelled to admit, Sister Romuald was as good as she was beautiful. Her nature was as lovely as her face. Envy, malice, and all uncharitableness had been omitted from her make-up. There were those, including the young men on the teaching staff, who wondered why she had never married and sighed in sympathy with what they imagined must be a secret sorrow. There were also those who argued, with Shakespeare:

Let those whom Nature hath not made for
store,
Harsh, featureless and crude, barrenly perish;
. . . She carved *thee* for her seal, and meant
thereby
Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy
die.

However, the plain and simple truth was that, far from having suffered an unhappy love affair, or the sudden death of her promised man, or to keep a vow made without due consideration of its consequences, Sister Mary Romuald was

a fulfilled and happy young woman and had the strongest religious vocation of anybody in the convent.

On the present occasion, perceiving that the older nun was heavily laden, she called out cheerfully across the intervening space,

"Your briefcase looks weighty, Sister. Jump in and let me run you over to school."

"You'll keep Father waiting," said Sister Mary Wolstan, coming up to the car, "but if you'll take the briefcase and drop it into school on your way back from the presbytery, I'd be rather glad."

Relieved of her burden, she quickened her steps, left the car-park by way of a side gate which opened on to the kitchen garden, took the short cut across this and, following a path past the third and largest of the ponds on the school field, reached the school car-park and the school entrance.

The vestibule outside her little office was occupied by three small girls and Sister Honorius. Unable to approach her office door because the visitors were in attendance upon a large, indignant bird, she surveyed the scene and remarked:

"It looks as though Jemima Puddleduck has been in a fight with one of the pigs."

"You should call him Jeremy Puddledrake," said Sister Honorius, without looking up from her ministrations, "or are you like Mrs. Cadogan, who, so the *Resident Magistrate* tells us, 'had all the disregard of her kind for the accident of sex in the brute creation'?"

Sister Honorius was a short, fat, grey-haired nun for whose equable temperament and sly sense of humour the headmistress often found herself grateful. On the present occasion Honorius was wearing a voluminous blue pinafore over her habit. Her hands were large and strong, her habit was well tucked up and, in place of the regulation black shoes, she was wearing a mud-plastered pair of Wellington

boots from which emanated the all-pervading effluvium of the pigsties.

Sister Wolstan wrinkled her nose.

"I advise you to get changed and to tell these children to run along to their form room," she said. "Don't you know it's a quarter to nine?"

"Mercy on us, so it is," said Sister Honorius, flipping aside her pinafore and extracting a turnip-like watch from the pocket of her habit. "Away with you, children, and my compliments and regrets to Sister Mary Fabian should she chance to have got there before you."

"She won't mind, Sister," they said. "She doesn't mind anything except us dropping lumps of wet clay on the floor and painting moustaches on each other."

As Sister Fabian was the art mistress, had been an art student and a careless bohemian before she Entered, and had brought much of her former insouciance into the convent with her, Sister Honorius could readily believe this.

"Run along! Run along!" she said. The children trotted off, two dancing pony-tails and a sober pigtail, and Sister Honorius retired to change out of her pinafore and her Wellingtons. Sister Wolstan crossed the vestibule, went past the window of her little office, which commanded a view of the entrance so that she could waylay visitors and enquire their business, tapped at the headmistress's door, opened it, and went in.

Sister Mary Hilary was seated behind her desk. She was a fresh-faced, capable-looking woman of forty-six, with high cheekbones, a pugnacious nose, full grey eyes, and a red mouth which owed nothing to art, but everything to natural good health and great vitality. She pushed a pile of correspondence towards her secretary.

"I've got a traveller coming at ten," she said, "and I've a good deal to say to the girls at Assembly this morning, so I'll leave you to sort out this lot. If there's anything to sign, I'll be free as soon as Jackson's man has gone."

“Very well, Sister,” said Sister Wolstan. She gathered the heap of letters, circulars, and bills into her scapular, bunched it up, and made for the door.

“And if Timms are still bothering us about that new tape recorder,” said Sister Hilary to her retreating back, “tell them on the phone that we don’t want it, and say that a letter follows. Sister Elphege wants those French records, the expensive Advanced Conversation ones, and we can’t afford those and a new tape recorder as well. Miss Grey will have to wait until I send in the next Requisition.”

“Miss Grey won’t be very pleased about that,” said Sister Wolstan, pausing at the door with the correspondence looped up in the lap of her scapular and her other hand on the doorhandle. “She badly wants that new tape recorder for Modern Dance now that Mrs. Golightly is not available to play the piano for her.”

“I know, but it can’t be helped. She will just have to manage with the old one for the time being. Sister Elphege takes the cookery classes as well as the French, and must have the help she wants. Perhaps sometimes I can free Sister Romuald to play for Miss Grey. I’ll see what can be done. When you’ve been through the correspondence perhaps you’d pop over to the house and get Sister St. Elmo to sign the chit I’ve left on your table. I’ve signed it, but it’s got to be endorsed. She’ll have sent Father off by now, so she ought to be free.”

CHAPTER 2

Sniper's Bullet

“Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-
like,
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-back'd
wave!”

George Meredith

Sister St. Elmo was the prioress. In the old days, thought Sister Wolstan, decanting the bundle of letters on to the seat of a basket chair which was there for the accommodation of children sent to her for first-aid in the matter of cut knees or wrenched ankles and which took up a disproportionate amount of space in the tiny office, Sister St. Elmo would have been referred to as Mother, or even Reverend Mother, but all that had been bundled into limbo. Everybody was downgraded nowadays, except the working-classes, thought Sister Wolstan.

The prioress was the child of a Maltese mother and an English father who, before the era that produced Mr. Mintoff, had been a chief petty officer in the Royal Navy. He had grown to like Malta well enough to fall in love with and marry one of the island women. Sister St. Elmo, prioress, was one of the end-products of this union, and had two older brothers.

Sister St. Elmo would have been a martinet except that she had wit enough to realise that the wind was changing,

even in convents, and that the old autocracies were out of date and were gone for ever.

Particularly she steered clear of upsetting or antagonizing Sister Mary Hilary, in whom she suspected there was enshrined the next head of the Order. For this and other reasons she had long left the school to flourish in its own way without interference from her.

When Sister Wolstan appeared, she was in conclave with Sister Mary Marcellus, the convent cook. Marcellus had joined the Order as a lay sister, but nowadays there were no such persons as lay sisters. In these changed times all were choir sisters and, as such, were expected to attend the four daily Hours of Divine Office which were now called Morning, Middle, Evening, and Night prayers. An exception to the rule was provided only if a Sister had any essential duties unconnected with the canonical Hours, otherwise every member of the Community was expected to be in chapel at the proper time. Sisters on school dinner duty, for example, were allowed to miss Middle Hour, and occasionally there were empty "stalls" if the school, or any section of it, happened to be out on an educational visit supervised by a nun during the set time of Evening prayer; but that about summed it up.

So far as Sister Marcellus was concerned, there was no exemption. She was supposed to arrange the cooking to suit the chapel Hours. Although this pleased her by giving emphasis to her status as a choir nun, and although she loved chapel, she remained true to her peasant upbringing and was always grumbling, a state of things that amused the younger nuns when they were feeling cheerful, but which they found a cross to bear when they were tired. Her main cause for complaint was voiced pretty regularly and referred to what she considered to be a lapse on the part of the General Council.

"I do not understand it, all this nonsense! Nobody to be called Mother in this Community? Not even the prioress? Not

even Sister Ignatius, who is ninety-three and soon to be taken to God? Perhaps / should be called Mother! Why not, then? Who else sees to it that you are fed? Is not that the work of a mother? Who goes to the market, I should like to know? Who has to stretch the money as far as it will go, yes, and farther than it will go? So my mother did for our family and so I do for you, *all* of you. And / go into the village on my own two feet and wait in a long queue for the bus to the town. No riding in the convent car for *me*! I was not taught to drive it. And I wait in another queue at the supermarket to pay for the groceries, and I wait in another queue for the bus to come back here, and I drag those groceries up the hill from the bus stop, yes, still on my own two feet, and why?—only that you may eat!”

“Well, if we didn’t eat we couldn’t teach, and then there would be no money for groceries and *you* wouldn’t eat, either,” said Sister Leo, who, with reason, considered herself to be overworked in school. “I would change places with you any day, Sister. How would *you* like to have three full-time subjects to teach and all that marking to do? Some people don’t know when they’re well off, do they?”

Sister Leo, who was thirty-five and, like her headmistress, a late entrant into religious life, unfortunately for herself was the kind of person who, for no very obvious reason, is let in for tasks she neither wishes nor is fitted to perform. In Sister Leo’s case, although a geographer by training and inclination, she had been compelled also to take on the history teaching, there having been no history specialist since the departure of that Mrs. Golightly who had combined the teaching of history with playing the piano for Miss Grey’s classes in Modern Dance. The Order had sent Sister Leo for three years to a Theological College, so she was also saddled with giving Divinity lessons to the Upper and Lower Fifth and the Sixth. This formidable programme had soured her outlook and given her scant patience with the groushings of Sister Marcellus.

Another nun on the teaching staff was the Sister Elphege who had demanded (and was to be given) the gramophone records of French Conversation. She was herself a Frenchwoman who taught the cookery classes by choice and Advanced French because Sister Hilary decreed it. She was a small, intense, vinegary body, contemptuous of the English and Irish nuns, more than contemptuous of Sister St. Elmo's mixed blood, and, altogether, a thorn in the flesh of most of her companions and particularly to Sister Leo, who thought that Sister Hilary favoured her.

There were only two of the others who got on with Sister Elphege at all well, although animosity and resentment on the part of the rest of the Community was usually carefully disguised; the two were Sister Romuald, whose all-embracing charity made her sorry for the grey-faced, waspish little Frenchwoman, and Sister Honorius, from whose simple good humour and tolerance any snide remarks and offensive allusions by the French nun bounced off as a tennis ball will bounce back from a mellow brick wall.

Sister Mary Wolstan, having retired to her little den with the morning's letters, began to sort and then to read them, making two piles as she did so. One pile consisted of correspondence with which she could deal without having to trouble the headmistress. The other would have to be submitted to Sister Hilary and the answers dictated, a course to which Sister Wolstan mutely but definitely objected, but which she was obliged to follow.

Over one letter she pursed up her lips. She re-read it, then, picking up the chit that required the signature of the prioress, took it and the letter over to the convent and handed both to Sister St. Elmo in the prioress's office.

Sister St. Elmo endorsed the one and read aloud the writing on the envelope that enclosed the other.

"To Whom It May Concern, Convent and School, Near Bristington." She drew out the letter, remarking as she did so, "Somebody who does not even know the name of our village. I suppose you have read this." She unfolded and perused it. "But this is school business, if business it can be called," she said. "In any case, the wastepaper basket is the place for anonymous rubbish."

"Rubbish it may be, but I thought you ought to see it," said Sister Wolstan.

"Has Sister Hilary read it?"

"Not yet. I thought I ought to leave it to your discretion whether she should see it or not. In any case, she is very busy this morning. For my own part, I have always thought it a mistake to have a young man in charge of that woodworkshed so far from the school buildings. Now, it seems, some nasty-minded busybody has had the same thought, and is probably not the only one."

"Well, you had better show the letter to Sister Hilary. I still cannot think why you did not wait until she had time to look at it, rather than bring it over here."

"There is the reference to Sister X, and the letter is addressed to the convent as well as to the school."

The prioress re-read the letter, this time aloud. "Sister X is a whited sepulchre. Why don't you have a look at what goes on in that big hut of yours by night? I wouldn't be too sure about the daytime, either, come to that. Get some eye-drops and clear the motes out of your eyes, you female Bartimeuses—or are you only too willing to be blind? A Well-Wisher, I don't think. Ha! Ha!" read the prioress aloud.

"My good Sister," she went on, putting down the letter, "this comes from some madman. However, as there is this reference to the woodwork centre, Sister Hilary must see it, and no doubt she will arrange for a stricter supervision to be kept on the hut for a while, if only to refute any further rumours. People have such prurient minds, unfortunately."

"And what about Sister X?"

“Well, what about her? The very fact that the writer does not give her a name proves her to be a fictional character. Take this crazy outpouring back to school. Sister Hilary will know what to do with it.”

“That woodwork-shed ought to come down,” said Sister Wolstan. “What do girls want with carpentry, anyway? I never liked the idea of a young man teaching big girls under such unsuitable and questionable conditions, and Sister Hilary knows my views.” Sister Wolstan had been in religion as long as the prioress herself; moreover, she allowed herself more licence with a half-Maltese than she would have done with someone who was not what she would have called “of mixed blood.”

The prioress, who had always suspected that this was Sister Wolstan’s view and who had to examine her conscience narrowly and often to quell the temptation to resent an attitude she felt was lacking in respect for her office, said sharply,

“Unsuitable in some ways the conditions may be, but you know perfectly well that such disturbing noises as sawing and hammering would be quite intolerable in the school building itself. The shed was there when the Order acquired the property and naturally it was put to good use. As for your employment of the word ‘questionable,’ I can assure you that young Mr. Chasset came to us with the highest references and, but for being the main support of a widowed mother who, incidentally, used to teach here, he would undoubtedly have gone into the priesthood. No more of these subversive opinions, therefore, I beg of you, Sister. They are mischievous and unbecoming.”

This rebuke was almost more than Sister Wolstan could bear. However, true to her training, she cast down her eyes, assumed a chastened demeanour and said, “Very well, Mother. Sister Hilary is engaged just at present. I will show her the letter as soon as she is free.”

Faced with the letter as soon as the travelling salesman of school books had gone, Sister Hilary emitted a snort of contempt, handed it back to Sister Wolstan, and said, "I suppose you had better let Sister St. Elmo see this. Then, unless she wants to keep it and make an investigation, you may destroy it. All the same, I think perhaps you might make a point of going over to the woodwork hut now and again just to keep an eye on things."

"What excuse shall I make?"

"There is no need for excuses. You need not go inside. You are sufficiently experienced to know, from outside the door or window, whether work is being carried on in a proper manner. Personally I have every confidence in Mr. Chassett, but if there are rumours flying around because he is out of our orbit and teaches the older girls, your visits should scotch them. If you have reason to think that he has problems with his discipline, you will, of course, report to me and no doubt I shall find a way of dealing with them."

"Sister St. Elmo has seen the letter," said Sister Wolstan, flushing as she remembered the prioress's stern rebuke. "You were not available earlier, so . . ."

"I see," said Sister Hilary, who was not in the least taken in by this specious excuse, but saw Wolstan's action for what it was—a rather mean little attempt to discredit her in the eyes of the prioress. "Oh, well, that's that, then." She tore the letter into tiny pieces, gathered these on to her blotting-pad, and handed the pad across the desk to Sister Wolstan. "Perhaps the lavatory pan would be the best place for this rubbish," she concluded, "unless you think it may clog the drain."

Mid-morning break came soon after Sister Wolstan had returned the blotting-pad without its load of mischief, and at break Sister Hilary sent a senior girl to find the caretaker and send him into her study.

"Quince," she said, when he appeared, "how many keys are there to the woodwork hut?"

“Keys, Sister? Let’s see now. You has one, I has one, Mr. Chasset, he have one, of course, and Mrs. Riggs have one so her can get in there and clean up. Ah, and do she grouse about the mess! ‘Worse than the art room,’ she do say. ‘One thing about the cookery room, Sister Elphege make them clean their own ovens and stove-tops. Why can’t Mr. Chasset make them sweep up their own sawdust and shavings? Knee-deep,’ she says, ‘and more work than one woman ought to have to cope with.’ That’s her grouse, Sister.”

“Yes, perhaps it is,” said Sister Hilary mildly.

“Ask *me*,” went on Tom Quince, encouraged by this reasonable attitude, “her have thoughts of giving in her notice on account of it.”

“Oh, she mustn’t do that. You had better tell her that I will consult with Mr. Chasset and see what can be done to leave the hut a little tidier.”

When she saw Ronald Chasset later in the day she said to him,

“I know of four keys to your hut. Could there be a fifth?”

Looking surprised, Ronald replied, “Not to my knowledge, Sister. There are yours and mine, Quince has one and so, I believe, has the cleaner.”

“Ah yes, the cleaner. Do you find her a grumbling, disgruntled kind of woman?”

“I don’t have any contact with her, Sister. I’m gone by the time she cleans out the hut.”

“Have you ever had any suspicion that some unauthorised person or persons might get into the hut after school hours? That is why I asked about another key.”

“Good gracious, no! Why should anybody get in?” But he blushed as he spoke and Sister Hilary noted it.

“Well, I intend to ask the cleaner to give up her key. I shall make no accusations, of course,” she said, eyeing him as though they shared in some conspiracy.

“You mean you think she may lend or hire out her key for—for—” stammered Chassett, now turning pale.

“Let us say ‘for clandestine assignments,’ Mr. Chassett. Will you see that the girls do their clearing up and leave the hut tidy when lessons are over?” concluded Sister Hilary, giving him a very sweet smile. “Good training for them, I think.”

Young Mr. Chassett, who foresaw that any clearing up would be done by him and him alone, ungraciously agreed.

CHAPTER 3

Accident

“No, no. The fault was mine, impute it to me,
Or rather to conspiring destiny,
Which (since I loved the form before) decreed
That I should suffer when I loved indeed.”

John Donne

On the whole, the village took little interest in the convent. This was because most of the convent connections were not with it, but with the town. The Catholic Church was in the town and so was the bank. The supermarket was there and so was the firm of motor coach owners from whom the convent hired the vehicles it needed for school outings. The railway station was there and, under the new and more liberal rules which die-hards such as Sister Wolstan deplored so much, the nuns were allowed a holiday every year to visit their families or stay at another convent. They needed the railway to take them to their destinations and bring them back. The convent even had its own car, so did not require the services of the village taxi to run nuns and their luggage to the station when they went on journeys.

There were, however, one or two points of contact. The village doctor was one; the post office was another, if only because the convent's perennial guests cashed their pension vouchers there before paying their dues to Sister Wolstan, who, in addition to acting as school secretary, was

the convent bursar. The only other real link, however, was with the local garage, which supplied petrol and kept the convent car on the road when its ailments were too serious to be treated at home by Tom Quince.

Village memories, though, are long ones, and there were those still alive who remembered a former small prosperity. In the days when the convent ran a boarding school there had been various perks for the villagers, which ceased when the supply of boarders had worked itself out and the day pupils were fetched and carried in their parents' private cars.

Gone, therefore, were the days when the shops in the village profited from the sale of sweets, cakes, pots of jam, and all those little extras upon which the boarding school pupils spent their pocket money. Gone, too, was the riding-school, which, threatened with liquidation when the school no longer hired hacks from it, had moved to other quarters; gone was the little restaurant that had provided cream teas. The town in those days was out of bounds to the pupils, but the village was not. In consequence, with the loss of the boarding school went a loss of trade and the shopkeepers did not forget that. One or two of them still nursed a feeling of grudge against the convent.

Nothing might ever have devolved from this but for a most unfortunate occurrence which derived directly from a meeting which took place about a fortnight after the first anonymous letter. It was the result of a decision by the prioress that to have one driver for the convent car was no longer sufficient for the needs of the Community, since, if that driver happened to be ill or otherwise unable to take the car out, there was nobody among the Community able to do it. She put the point to the assembled nuns at one of those gatherings at which general convent affairs were discussed.

"But we have two drivers already," Sister Hilary pointed out.

“You mean Sister Romuald and Tom Quince. Yes, I know, but it is not always convenient to take Tom from his other duties merely so that he may drive the car. Besides, he might be taking his annual fortnight at the same time as Sister Romuald is away on her family holiday, and then where should we be? No, I am quite clear in my mind that we must train another driver.”

“Couldn’t it be arranged that one of our present drivers is always there?” asked Sister Honorius.

“Then there is the question of using the car for these holiday journeys,” proceeded the prioress, ignoring Sister Honorius, who had turned up late at the meeting for the inadequate reason that she had been in attendance upon her beloved animals. Therefore she was under Sister St. Elmo’s displeasure for the time being. “I have been looking into some figures and I find that, now everybody is entitled to take an annual holiday, the train fares run us into a considerable amount of money. By using the car we could save at least a pound or two each time anybody goes on leave.”

“Only if the journeys were short ones—say a hundred miles or less—or if everybody was willing to spend her furlough at another of our houses instead of with her family,” said Sister Hilary. “No driver of ours ought to be expected to do more than two hundred miles in a day. I would think even that was rather much for one of the Sisters, when you consider the state of the car.”

“The car is perfectly roadworthy,” said Sister St. Elmo, coldly.

“Of course. All the same, it is very old. One could expect delays and breakdowns on long journeys. Apart from that, the point I wished to make is that the Sister who is acting as driver, whether it is Sister Romuald or another, would have to make the journey there and back in one day, unless her destination was another of our houses. There, of course, she could be put up for the night, but even that might not

always be convenient. Not every house has the accommodation that we have here."

"Quite so," said the prioress. "I had not considered that aspect, nor thought about the length of the journeys."

"Apart from that," Sister Hilary went on, "if your plan were carried out, every time somebody went on holiday not only should we be deprived of two of the Community instead of only the one whose leave it was, but we should lose the use of the car itself for the best part of twenty-four hours. What we should need would be two cars as well as two drivers."

"Then there is Sister Marcellus," went on the prioress, this time as though Sister Hilary had not spoken. "It is really becoming too much for her to drag the shopping uphill from the bus stop. Apart from that, the bus fares are continually soaring, and to pay them twice and usually three times a week runs us into an unnecessary amount of money considering that we have the car, not to speak of the continual tax upon Sister's strength, of course."

"Oh, but, Sister!" exclaimed Hilary, dismayed by what this appeared to imply and nettled, also, by the slight snub she felt she had received over her last argument.

"But what, Sister?" the prioress asked, with what was intended as a propitiatory smile. She was anxious, as usual, not to antagonise the headmistress and felt that the snub she had administered had been undiplomatic and had been given out of pique for having been worsted in argument.

"Well, even if we do train another driver, it still means she would have to be a member of my staff," said Sister Hilary, "unless you yourself are thinking of learning to drive."

"I am too old, I fear, Sister."

"Well, I simply cannot spare a teacher to take Sister Marcellus shopping three mornings a week during term-time. It would make nonsense of my timetable and lead to all sorts of complications. We are recognised by the Ministry,

if you remember, so how should I feel if one of Her Majesty's inspectors came in and I had to explain that a teacher was taking Sister into town to do the shopping?"

"Ah, now, *that* I *have* thought about, Sister," said the prioress, somewhat smugly. "I am going to trade in our present refrigerator for a very much larger one with a big deep-freeze compartment. This means that, so long as the shopping can be brought by car instead of Sister Marcellus having to carry it uphill from the bus stop, it need be done only once a week."

"But, even so . . ."

"On Saturdays," concluded the prioress, "when school is closed. That should meet your very proper objections, I think, Sister."

Sister Marcellus, who had put on a martyred expression at the mention of her having to carry the shopping uphill from the bus stop, now changed it to one of horror and alarm. The last thing she wanted was to have her two (sometimes three) weekly outings cut down so drastically to one only, and that one to be on a Saturday, when not only was the supermarket crowded out, but when she was accustomed to allow herself the luxury of a long lie-in while the others got their own breakfasts.

"But on Saturdays you yourself need the car, Sister," she said, "to pick up the flowers and take them to the church and arrange them so beautifully for Sundays."

"I've thought of that, too," said the prioress. "The car seats four persons, so it will certainly take three of us and your shopping. The driver, whether it be Sister Romuald or some other, can drop me off at the church—the flowers are always ready soon after nine in the morning—and then you can do your shopping while Sister waits for you, and I can be picked up when you are ready to return. There is no problem at all, you see."

"Except," said Sister Mary Leo, "to settle which of us is going to learn to drive. As I have defective eyesight, I think

that for the general safety it had better not be me."

"There is nothing wrong with your eyesight that your spectacles cannot cope with," said the prioress, "but, as you are unwilling, perhaps we should look elsewhere."

"I'm afraid I should be much too nervous to make a safe driver," said Sister Mary Fabian, meaning that it was not her nervous system but her fecklessness that was the danger.

"The choice of a learner-driver need not be settled at this meeting. It certainly requires thought," said the prioress. "Now to another matter, and one that I hope will relieve Sister Leo of some of her rather heavy school duties. Will you explain, Sister Hilary?"

"Oh, yes," said Sister Hilary. "I've realised for some time that Sister Leo has too heavy a timetable. She takes every form for both history and geography, in addition to the preparation of her daily Religious Education lessons, for which, as you know, she has had special training at a College of Theology. She is a geography specialist, actually, and I have had it in mind for some time that she ought to be relieved of her history teaching. Well, the chance has come. The Superior is sending us Sister Mary Raymund who has a degree in economics and can take over the history, perhaps on those lines. I am sure that the more everybody knows about economics in these times, the better."

"Perhaps she knows how to drive a car," said Sister Leo, hopefully.

"Most young people drive nowadays," said Sister Fabian.

Sister St. Elmo correctly summed up the feeling of the meeting. Nobody felt the urge to learn to drive the convent car; some were too old; Sister Hilary, who had kept it dark, ever since she Entered, that she had been a driver for ten years, was, in any case, too important to be sent on errands. Those who were not too old (in the prioress's opinion) were clearly not willing to face the responsibility of being put in charge of a lethal vehicle on congested roads

and amongst fast traffic. She said, with finality and great simplicity:

“Well, if Sister Raymund does not know how to drive the car, she will have to learn, that’s all.”

Everyone breathed again.

Apart from her occasional disregard of traffic lights, coupled with a tendency to exceed the speed limit, Sister Mary Romuald was a skilful driver. To save money, she and Tom were told by the prioress that they would take it in turns to have Sister Mary Raymund as their pupil.

She turned out to be an earnest, willing, moon-faced young nun not very long out of the novitiate. It was soon obvious that she desired to please not only the prioress and Sister Hilary, but everybody else, including Sister Marcellus (whom she suspected of having a sharp and scolding tongue) and even the convent’s paying guests, Mrs. Wilks, Miss Lipscombe, and Mrs. Polkinghorne.

She came of a family that had been Catholic for generations. She had been taken to Rome as a child and had entered the Order as soon as she had finished her economics course and obtained her degree. Her parents were of moderate affluence; she was the fourth of their six children; and conditioned to piety and religious observances since her earliest years.

Like most of her generation, she had been “brought up with cars,” as she explained to the prioress, and would be glad to learn to drive.

“She’ll hardly pass her test first pop out of the box,” said Tom, in grinning understatement to Sister Mary Romuald after he had taken Sister Raymund out for two or three trial runs.

“She knows the Highway Code backwards, anyway,” said Sister Romuald cheerfully, “so she’ll be all right there.”

“Be as well if Sister St. Elmo would let her have a lesson or two from a pro, though, wouldn’t you say?”

“I did suggest it, Tom, but Sister thinks you and I are adequate.”

“Penny wise, pound foolish, if you ask me,” said Tom, wagging his head.

This gloomy prophecy was destined to be fulfilled on the Saturday of the following week.

Soon after half-past nine in the morning Sister Romuald deposited the prioress at the parish church to arrange the flowers, then she decanted Sister Marcellus as near the supermarket as the parking regulations allowed, picked up Marcellus and the shopping half an hour later, and then called for the prioress at the church and the three of them returned to the convent.

They arrived back at barely half-past eleven, too early for Middle Hour prayers and much too early for lunch. They found Sister Raymund waiting in the convent car-park.

“If you have time, Sister,” she said, timidly, “could you please let me have a go in the car?”

“Oh, of course!” Sister Mary Romuald smiled charmingly. “You can take me as far as the common and round by Mere Edge. There won’t be much traffic that way. Keep a sharp lookout going through the village, though, because the children won’t be at school and they are apt to play in the street.”

“I didn’t do too badly last week, when I was with Mr. Quince. I think I’m getting the hang of it, but, of course, I’ll be careful,” said the optimistic, round-faced, ingenuous nun.

“Good. You haven’t been through the village *before*, though, have you?”

“Oh, but I have! I had a double period of marking-time on Thursday, and Sister Hilary said I might take a driving lesson with Mr. Quince if he was free and I had no marking to do. Well, I don’t know whether he *really* was free, and, of course, there is always marking to do, but Mr. Quince was

willing and we went through the village. It was very encouraging because I managed quite well at the cross roads and practised reversing and everything.” She spoke with modest self-congratulation, not having heard Tom’s subsequent comment on her performance.

“Yes, but the village schoolchildren weren’t about,” Sister Romuald gently reminded her. “They’re a real menace on Saturdays because they *will* play in the street instead of going on to the common. I found I had to be very careful driving through the village this morning.”

The accident happened, as accidents usually do, unexpectedly and without previous warning. The village street was narrow and the car was down to just under thirty miles an hour. This was just as well, for what might have been a fatality stopped short of that, although the child’s injuries were serious enough to warrant her being treated in hospital.

It all happened so quickly that, in court, although she tried her best, Sister Mary Romuald, who was called as a witness, found it impossible to relate exactly what had occurred. The charge against Sister Raymund was of driving without due care and attention and the police had made it clear that it might easily have been one of dangerous driving except that their measurements showed that the car was not travelling fast.

“You say that a dog ran out from the right-hand side of the road?” asked the prosecution.

“Yes.”

“And that, in swerving to avoid the dog, the driver struck the child?”

“Yes.”

“Where was the child before the car struck her?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“But you were a passenger in the car, so what do you mean by that?”

"I was looking the other way to make sure that the dog was all right."

"You were more concerned about the dog than about the child?"

"Certainly not. That is a dreadful thing to suggest. The child ran into the road, but I did not see her in time to warn the driver."

"Because you were looking at the dog?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure the child ran into the road?"

"Oh, yes. She must have come tearing out of the alley which leads up to the village church and she was almost under our wheels when the driver swerved to the left to avoid the dog."

"I believe there is no pavement on that side of the road—the side from which the child ran out?"

"No, there is not."

"So, as there is no pavement, I would take it that people are perfectly entitled to walk along, on that side of the road, in the road?"

"Yes, of course, but the little girl . . ."

"And I might also assume that, as pedestrians have no option *but* to walk along the roadside, there being no pavement, it is the plain duty of a motorist to take pains to avoid them?"

"Yes, but, you see . . ."

"Thank you, Sister. That will be all."

The defence rose.

"You say, Sister—and the prosecution does not contest it—that your driver was keeping within the urban speed limit?"

"Yes. I kept my eye on the speedometer. We were below thirty miles an hour as we passed through the village."

"When did you first catch sight of the child?"

"A fraction of a second before we hit her."

"Why only a fraction of a second?"

"Because she was running very fast. She came pelting out of Church Alley into the road, and my driver had no chance of avoiding her."

"The driver is a learner, of course. Could an experienced driver have avoided the accident, do you think?"

"Nobody could have avoided it, however experienced they were. I have been driving, with a clean licence, for seven years, and I cannot see how any driver could have avoided the accident. The child ran straight into the middle of the road."

"Why do you think the child was running so fast? Did you see any cause for that?"

"She was being chased by an older child, a biggish boy."

"And she ran into the road in front of the car to get away from him?"

"Yes. I heard her scream, but she could not stop herself and no driver could have pulled up in time to save her from injury."

All this was but a fraction of the evidence called, but one of the witnesses was the biggish boy. He was sullen and frightened, but truthful.

"Yes, I run after young Polly. I had a spider in me fist. She don't like spiders. Yes, she run out into the road. Yes, I seen the car hit her. No, I reckon she run in front of it. Yes, I knows the dawg. It's Mrs. Hawkins' dawg. It's a guard dawg, supposed to be, but it ain't trained right. Yes, it's always running into the road. Yes, it had the postman orf of his boike week before last. I didn't half laugh. A proper mucker he come. Yes, the dawg rushes out at anythink on wheels. No, he don't bark, he just rushes. He don't like wheels, and young Polly Blatt, she don't like spiders."

"Now you don't need to fret, Sister," said Tom Quince when, under orders from the prioress but much against her own will, Sister Raymund took her next driving-lesson. "You was

exonerated, wasn't you? Well, then! And old Mother Hawkins have been ordered to keep that dog off the street, so what have you got to worry about? You'd have spotted the damn' kid if it hadn't been for the damn' dog, if you'll excuse my French. Now, see here, Sister! We're going through the village and *you're* going to drive. It's the only way to make sure your nerve stands up."

As it was a week-day, all the children were in school, and as it was also a day on which Sister Marcellus had never gone to the town to do the marketing, nobody was expecting to see either a nun waiting at the bus stop or a nun driving the convent car, for it was long after the time when Sister Mary Romuald was accustomed to take Father MacNicol back to the presbytery and not one of his days for saying Mass at the convent, anyway. The upshot was that there was nobody in the village except the milkman on his second round and a couple of women gossiping outside their front doors.

"There you are, you see," said Tom, encouragingly, when they returned from their drive having experienced no untoward incident except an occasional stalling of the engine. "Right as rain, eh, Sister? Nothing to worry about, was there?"

"No, but only because there weren't any children," said Sister Mary Raymund, her ingenuous moon-face clouding over.

"Oh, well, Sister Romuald says she'll be the one to take the trip next Saturday. After that, all what's happened will be forgot, and it wasn't nowise your fault, remember. It was only that stupid kid and the damn' dog."

"I *was* to blame," said Sister Raymund, "and I don't think this is the end of it, somehow, Mr. Quince. I was brought up in a village and villagers have very long memories."

"Oh, well, them as lives longest will see most," said Tom philosophically. "Now just mind the gatepost this time."

“’Tis not as deep as a well nor as wide as a church door, but ’twill serve,” said Sister Raymund, smiling.

“So all your troubles is over,” said Tom, as they came safely to anchor in the convent car-park. “Told you, didn’t I?”

CHAPTER 4

Other Inmates

"I remember a house where all were good
To me, God knows, deserving no such thing."

Gerard Manley Hopkins

The nuns were not the only people who lived in the convent building. Some of the rooms were allotted to paying guests and, in some special cases, to guests who were not asked to pay. At one time these guest rooms had been school dormitories, but the boarding school, as such, had long been a thing of the past. There were good and sufficient reasons for this. For one thing, without extensive rebuilding it would have been impossible to keep pace with the increase in the number of children; for another, it was difficult to get resident staff and the nuns became too few to cope with all the extra duties which were involved in running a boarding school.

The change had been made gradually. Girls who were already boarders had the option of remaining in residence until they left the school and, as the numbers had been small in those days, in a few years worked themselves out. Newcomers were offered tuition only, and, in the day of the ubiquitous motor-car, it suited parents well enough to bring their children to school and take them home again, as most of them lived in the town.

The convent building, however, was too large to house the nuns only, especially when they became fewer, so the three one-time dormitories were partitioned off to make six good-sized bedrooms. Old Miss Lipscombe's room was typical of most of the bedrooms in the house. In addition to the usual furnishings, it contained a comfortable basket chair and a solitary bookshelf intended for devotional works but, in Miss Lipscombe's case, given over to the display of one or two prized ornaments which she had salvaged from her old home and brought with her to the convent.

Miss Lipscombe had lived at the convent for the past five years and knew more about its inside workings than any of the other inmates suspected. She was considered to be a comparatively harmless old creature, but she had an itch to ferret things out. Some instinct seemed to tell her when and where there was anything to be learnt, but, having learnt it, she did not always gossip about it. Sometimes she turned it over in her mind and extracted every scrap of flavour from it simply by speculating upon it, but sometimes she told stories in which she built up imaginary situations, in which case her hearers ended up with a mental image which, although originally based on fact, hardly approximated to the truth by the time Miss Lipscombe had done with telling the tale.

The only person who had really summed her up, and knew how dangerous she could turn out to be, was Tom Quince. Tom combined the duties of school caretaker with those of odd-job man and general factotum to the convent. He cleaned and, when Sister Romuald was not available and before the arrival of Sister Raymund, he had driven the convent car, and it was while he was attending to some trivial mechanical fault in it one Saturday morning when Sister Romuald was waiting to run the prioress to the parish church and Sister Marcellus to the supermarket for the weekly shopping, that he said to the beautiful nun:

"So Mrs. Wilks be leaving us, then."

Sister Mary Romuald looked surprised.

"Leaving us? How do you mean, Tom?"

"Giving up her room. Going back into the wicked old world."

"I'm sure you are mistaken. Who told you so?"

"Heard it at the garridge when I took her down to fill her up yesterday before she started to knock." He slapped the bonnet of the car to indicate that he referred to the ancient vehicle and not to the elderly lady. "It isn't true, then, Sister?"

"Not so far as I am aware."

"Oh, well, I reckon as old Miss Lipscombe have been spreading tales around. No love lost between her and Mrs. Wilks. Bit of wishful thinking, I suppose. Wants to be rid of the old pussy. Cat eat cat, you might say."

"That's not a very charitable way to put it, Tom."

"No more it isn't, but you knows as well as I do what a couple of old pussies 'em be. Alius on about each other. Oh, well, as long as it keeps 'em happy! Well," he gave the car another affectionate slap, "the old girl's all right again now, you'll find, so what about one of them convent ten-pound notes you dishes out?" He grinned disarmingly and Sister Romuald responded with her delightful smile.

"Of course," she said. "God bless you, Tom. I don't know what we should do without you. There you are, then, and thank you."

"That's the ticket. That's what I likes to hear you say. There we are, then, and just you mind how you go. They got half the high street up between Boots and the Co-op. It's one-way traffic, so watch them temp'ry lights. If they's red, no matter what your hurry, you pull up and wait till they changes, see?"

"But I always do."

"No, you don't, neither. Who sailed slap through the 'stop' sign last Toosday week after school? If it had been

anybody but young Duffy on dooty you'd have collected a ticket, and so I'm telling you!"

"How do *you* know anything about it?" asked Sister Romuald, wrongheadedly amused by all this.

"Cos I does my homework where you're concerned, that's how. Learnt you to drive, didn't I? So I feels responsible when you goes and does anything daft." Fortunately Sister Romuald did not recognise this as a declaration of undying love.

The Mrs. Wilks to whom Tom Quince had referred occupied the room next to Miss Lipscombe's sanctum on the ground floor. It was perfectly true that there was no love lost between the two elderly ladies, and the zealous Sister Marcellus had once suggested to the prioress that one of them should be moved to the floor above in an endeavour to put a curb on their endless rivalry.

"Yes, but which one to move, Sister?" had been Sister St. Elmo's unanswerable query; so the two old ladies were left to their feuding and their passionate, unending attempts to get the upper hand of one another. Each felt that she had an advantage over the other; Mrs. Wilks, although she was widowed, certainly had achieved marital status and looked down upon Miss Lipscombe, who was unfortunate enough not to have attained to this estate; however, Miss Lipscombe was the daughter of a former mayor of the nearby town and, owing to the early death of her mother, had acted for one unforgettable year as his mayoress, a feat which Mrs. Wilks could never hope to match.

Mrs. Wilks had once referred to Miss Lipscombe as "that old maiden from Bristington," and Miss Lipscombe had been known to describe Mrs. Wilks as "that butcher-boy's daughter who lived above their own shop." Honours, to date, were about even, Mrs. Wilks having reminded her hearer, a certain Mrs. Polkinghorne, the Spanish widow of an English merchant master mariner, that Cardinal Wolsey himself had been the son of a flesher, and Miss Lipscombe

having informed the same inmate that she was pleased and proud to be called a maiden, which was more than *some* people could have said about themselves, even *before* they were married.

The convent followed tradition in that it was built round a cloister. On three sides was the house itself; on the fourth side there was a high brick wall in which two wrought-iron gates opened on to the nuns' garden with its lawn, its grotto, and its statue of the Virgin.

From the front door and square hall of the convent a passage led straight through to the cloister. It passed between the guest room allotted to Mrs. Wilks and that of Mrs. Polkinghorne. On the kitchen garden side of Mrs. Wilks's room was Miss Lipscombe's domain and, as the ground floor bedrooms had once been school dormitories, their windows were heavily barred.

The room next to that occupied by Mrs. Polkinghorne was devoted to the very old nun, Sister Mary Ignatius, so that she could reach the chapel by the shortest possible route, for her room opened on to that part of the cloister which led directly to the chapel door. The rest of the ground floor housed the Community Room (a kind of nuns' common-room), the convent parlour where visitors could be entertained and in which all meals to seculars were served, the prioress's office, the little sacristy which was attached to the chapel, the chapel itself, the kitchen, the nuns' refectory, and the convent library.

There were two staircases which led up to the first floor, and these were at opposite angles of the building, one near the kitchen garden entrance, the other next to the chapel. There was also a combined washroom and lavatory on the ground floor by the door to the kitchen garden.

Only two of the original dormitories were on the ground floor. The other, an even larger room, had also been sub-

divided and was on the first floor immediately above the front hall and passage and the rooms occupied by Miss Lipscombe and Mrs. Wilks. It now formed two large rooms; one of these was kept vacant for such times as the Superior of the Order made a Visitation or needed accommodation when she was journeying from one convent of the Companions of the Poor to another, and the other was usually reserved for visiting nuns, although sometimes it was put at the disposal of any visiting priest who could not be accommodated at the presbytery.

Along a corridor on the first floor were also the little rooms at one time allotted to the resident secular teaching staff (all women, in those days) when the school had catered for boarders. These rooms, at the moment, were empty, and had been empty for years, although once a year Sister Marcellus resentfully aired the beds in them and gave them a spring cleaning, this to her usual accompaniment of grumbling comment.

As the convent was built on a hill up which Sister Marcellus had been obliged at one time to hoist the shopping, there were extensive cellars under the ground floor and these could be reached by a door in the cloister under the staircase near the chapel, but the cellars, except for the storage of junk, had been out of use for some considerable time.

Whatever the private feelings of frustration, guilt, fear, animosity, and sheer spite there might be among the inmates or, on the other hand, what experiences they may have had of fulfilment, comfort, satisfaction, or religious ecstasy, it is certain that there was one person who seldom left the cloister but who was entirely content and happy. Old Sister Ignatius (named not for the founder of the Jesuits, but for that St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who was martyred under Trajan) had few memories of her native Italy, although she was bilingual.

In 1896 her father had been killed in Abyssinia when the Italian forces had been defeated there, and she and her mother had been invited to join relatives in England. At the age of twenty she had joined the Companions of the Poor and, at the end of her novitiate, she had been shuttled to and fro between one and another of their convents, sometimes to teach, sometimes to nurse the sick, twice to act as prioress, and once to spend six years as head of the Order.

Now she was old, tired, but contented. Her faith, unimpaired by difficulties, frustrations, and sorrows, told her exactly where she was going and how to get there. She had neither doubts nor fears. She was fully aware of the wickedness of the world and was equally convinced that, even so, right would conquer wrong and virtue vice.

Mrs. Polkinghorne expressed equal belief in these things, but she missed the exotic even if somewhat tawdry trappings of religion in her native Spain, and regarded the Catholic parish church, which she attended at such times as Mass was not served in the convent chapel, as little more inspiring than the bare and austere furnished Protestant churches of her adopted country. Except for the pictorial representations of the Stations of the Cross around its walls and a couple of simpering statues, she found the Catholic Church of SS Peter and Paul (saints whom the English Church recognised, anyway) cold, impersonal, rigidly hygienic, and (not to mince matters) dull.

As for Miss Lipscombe and Mrs. Wilks, only their unending feud and the necessity for preparing fresh shafts to aim at and, if possible, wound each other, kept them interested in life at all. Both paid the whole of their State pensions into the convent economy and each was given sufficient pocket-money for small personal matters and, twice yearly, an allowance for clothes, but both were convinced that the money the convent took from them more than covered the cost of their keep and both resented what

they regarded as the prioress's rapacity and meanness. Nevertheless, both knew perfectly well that nowhere else could they have lived as cheaply, therefore, so far as Sister St. Elmo was aware, they were fixtures at the convent, so much so that, had she overheard Tom's remark about Mrs. Wilks's impending departure, she would have found it quite incredible. She knew, too, that they found a zest for life in their perpetual quarrelling. What they found to say at Confession about their hatred for one another nobody knew and it was nobody's business except that of the lean, dark, Highland Scot, Father MacNicol, who once confided to Sister St. Elmo that he groaned in spirit when he saw either of them in the offing.

"I know," Sister St. Elmo had replied. "I know exactly what you mean, Father. All the same, if it keeps them happy . . ."

"But how can it?"

"I really think that in some strange way it does. They can't do with each other because there is such a rooted antipathy between them; yet they could not do without one another, either."

"They sound like the two old men in Lady Gregory's play," said the priest, with his melancholy smile. Sister St. Elmo had never heard of Lady Gregory, so she made no comment.

As for Mrs. Polkinghorne, so far as anybody knew, she was comfortably settled and was the only one of the three old ladies who really "paid her way." She had a daughter, a nun attached to another house belonging to the Companions of the Poor, and a son who was a priest in South America, so she would have been persona grata at the convent in any case. She never presumed upon her connections, was as devotional as only a woman reared in the Spanish tradition can be and, so far as was known, lived at peace with all people. She had her uses. She provided a safety valve for Miss Lipscombe and Mrs. Wilks, both of

whom came to her with their troubles and to let off steam against one another, and, having been brought up in a port-side café where arguments were apt to be settled with knives, Mrs. Polkinghorne was careful never to take sides, but to speak her hearers fair and offer them sympathy but no comment.

She was useful now and again in other ways, too. When Sister Elphege was absent from school for several weeks because she had broken her leg, Mrs. Polkinghorne had taken over the cookery classes and the school learned the culinary art as it was practised in the restaurants of Valencia and Alicante. Occasionally, too, the school acquired a pupil from Argentina or the convent a visiting priest from Peru or Chile, and it then became Mrs. Polkinghorne's proud duty to talk with the stranger in Spanish and make him or her feel at home. As she had had pious parents who had sent her to a good school in Madrid, upon the port-side argot of her upbringing had been grafted the pure speech of Castilian Spain. This could be understood by her hearers, no matter what their origins, though it bore about the same relationship to the various local and South American dialects as the classical Roman tongue may have borne to the Church Latin of the Middle Ages. All the same, it was a valuable means of communication with Spanish-speaking foreigners, and was prized as such by Sisters St. Elmo and Hilary.

But Mrs. Polkinghorne still missed her handsome although sometimes erring husband. The old saying "a wife in every port" contains that half-truth which undermines the fact that most sailors are sufficiently faithful to "the little woman back home" and take their pleasures of necessity rather than of wantonness. She also missed her son. Her daughter came to see her once a year, when the young nun stayed in the convent on her summer holiday, but, all the same, this daughter was also there as a member of the Order. Besides, to most parents, a son means much more

than a daughter, if only because families are anxious for the dynasty to be carried on in the direct male line, further proof (if proof be needed) that property means more than persons and that the family, in the round, is more important than the individuals who compose it.

Mrs. Polkinghorne's priestly son, however, had absolved himself from the necessity of carrying on the family name. He had embraced celibacy and sacrificed posterity; and, while one side of Mrs. Polkinghorne's mind accepted this as a special grace, she still yearned for the grandchildren whom she knew she would never see, and for a visit from a son who might as well have been in heaven already, for all she ever saw of him.

CHAPTER 5

Exit Mrs. Wilks

“What beck’ning ghost, along the moonlight
shade

Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade?”

Alexander Pope

From exactly which branch of the grape-vine Tom Quince had culled his information remained obscure, but the news turned out to be correct. A week after he had spoken to Sister Romuald, Mrs. Wilks moved out of her convent guest room and betook herself to a destination whose location she disclosed to none of the others, not even to Mrs. Polkinghorne.

She presented herself one morning at the prioress’s office and said in an important voice that she would be glad of a word about her room. The prioress, sighing inwardly, said,

“Well, we could put you on the first floor, Mrs. Wilks, if that would do.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining about the room itself, Sister.”

“What, then?”

“Do I have to give notice?”

“Notice of what?”

“Notice to vay-cate my present domicile.”

“You want to leave us?” (“Too good to be true,” thought Sister St. Elmo.)

"To leave, yes. It would really suit me to go right away now—well, tomorrow, say—but I wouldn't wish to inconvenience you, so I want to know what notice you would require."

"Well, of course you are free to go whenever you wish, Mrs. Wilks, but if it's some little unfriendly argument which has upset you, wouldn't it be wise to think things over before you do something you might regret?"

"Oh, it's nothing like that, Sister. That there are, and always have been, little rifts within the lute I'll not deny. I've had much to put up with, as you should know, but we'll say no more about that. The fact is, I've had an offer in that letter which came the other day. You remember handing me a letter?"

"An offer? You don't mean . . .?"

"Oh, not *that* sort of offer, not at my age, Sister! I've had an offer of alternative accommodation."

"I see."

"And I shall be going where I shall be able to keep my pension clear, such as it is, and spend it on myself," said Mrs. Wilks spitefully, "and *that* will make a change after seven years!"

"I see. You are sure the offer is genuine, I suppose?" ("Old ladies," thought St. Elmo—who was not without knowledge of the outside world—are sometimes easily imposed upon, especially if they happen to have a little nest-egg stashed away somewhere, as she had often suspected was the case with Mrs. Wilks.)

"Oh, it's *genuine* enough, and about time it was made, too and all. Oh, yes, it's genuine. So I can leave tomorrow, is that it?"

"Certainly, if you've made up your mind. You had better leave me your new address, hadn't you, so that I can send on any letters?"

"Oh, if you like, but that's all arranged for. The post office will do it." (The grape-vine perhaps was beginning to

disclose its roots, or so Sister Romuald would have thought, had she overheard the conversation. Postmistress to garage, garage proprietor to Tom, Tom to Sister Romuald.)

"I see. Well, Mrs. Wilks, we shall be sorry to lose you, of course. If you need any help with your luggage, I'm sure Tom Quince would be willing to carry anything down to the bus stop for you. I'll tell him to be prepared. Which bus do you wish to catch?"

"Oh, I shan't be travelling by *bus*," said Mrs. Wilks grandly.

"*Well!*" said Miss Lipscombe to Mrs. Polkinghorne. "To go off like that, with her nose in the air, and no dignified farewells or anything, Really, some persons have *no* breeding!"

"She wish to make a nice exit," explained Mrs. Polkinghorne, "and perhaps also she feel *timido*."

"Timid? That one! Don't make me laugh!"

"Not timid. I mean shy. It was a very large car. Perhaps she feel *con remordimientos* because she leave us so grand and we so poor. Yes, the car was very big, very rich, much space in it."

"More like a funeral hearse, if you ask *me*. And that man who came to the door to get her. *Very* flash, and a bit Jewish, if you ask *me*, I say again."

"But I do not ask you," thought Mrs. Polkinghorne, "you miserable old *ramera*!" Aloud she said, "Perhaps he is a nephew and think it is time he do something for his old aunt. I do not like Jews, but they are often good to their own kind."

"This one has taken his time, then. She's been here longer than I have, and I've been here five years. And not to tell a soul where she's going! Fishy, if you ask *me*."

"But I don't ask you, you silly old *zorra*!" again thought Mrs. Polkinghorne. She said aloud, "Some persons do not like to discuss their business with others. If the *bienhechor*

is a Jew, I think maybe it is the *religiosas* who are not to be told where she goes.”

“Well, I shouldn’t tell them, if Mrs. Wilks asked me not to,” said Miss Lipscombe virtuously. “But why *shouldn’t* they know? That’s what I ask myself, because I’m pretty sure Mrs. Wilks has no Jewish connections. That’s why I think there’s something behind it all—something which isn’t very nice. The Jews have a bad reputation where we are concerned, you know. I think this man is a scoundrel.”

Mrs. Polkinghorne sighed. She foresaw that there was going to be a lot of this sort of thing during the ensuing weeks. At least while the other two had been occupied with their squabbles, their determination each to go one better than the other, and their mutual recriminations, she had managed to get sufficient time to herself to conduct her devotions in peace and to crochet the interminable lengths of coarse lace destined to embellish surplices; but now she envisaged herself caught, as it were, in a trap, for Miss Lipscombe, having nobody else to talk to, would talk to *her* and, what was worse, having nobody else to quarrel with, might even quarrel with her. These thoughts were insupportable. She went to the prioress.

“*Querida madre*,” she said winningly, “I like to change my room to be upstairs. No more can I mount those tall stairs. My legs, they do not go so good no more.”

“It’s only once a week,” said the prioress, “that you use the bathroom, Mrs. Polkinghorne, isn’t it?”

“Not bathroom,” protested the señora. “That Miss Lipscombe, always she is in our *excusado* when I need him most, so I mount the stairs and that is not good for my legs. Three, four, five times a day I am mounting these stairs.”

“Oh, I see. Well, if you like, you may have one of the rooms on the first floor, but it would have to be one of the little cubicles the school-teachers used to have. I can’t let you have the room we keep ready for the Superior when she comes, and the other good room up there we keep empty

for when we have a visiting priest or a Sister on holiday. You know that, don't you? Your own daughter had it last year."

"Then I do not change my room. I mount the stairs when I must, whatever my weak heart and my poor feet may say against it," observed Mrs. Polkinghorne resignedly.

"I'm sure you'll manage," said the prioress. Her next visitor was Miss Lipscombe.

"Dear Mother Prioress," began Miss Lipscombe, ingratiatingly.

("I am called Sister St. Elmo, as well you know," thought the prioress, "and soft soap will get you nowhere.") "Oh dear!" she said. "Don't tell me you want to change your room!"

"Such a tiny request, dear Mother. I just wondered whether I might move into Mrs. Wilks's old room now that it is vacant. I get rather nervous at nights and I don't like the idea of sleeping next to an empty room."

"Well, even if you did move into Mrs. Wilks's old room, you would still have the front-door passage between you and Mrs. Polkinghorne. What difference would it make? You would still be next to an empty room, too. I mean the room you occupy now."

"It would be better than an empty room *and* an empty corridor."

"Oh, very well, provided you can manage to make the changeover without help, unless Mrs. Polkinghorne is willing to give you a hand. I can't ask Sister Marcellus to add to all her other work."

"There is nothing to do except take my bits and pieces in there. I know Sister Marcellus has stripped the sheets and pillowcases to go to the wash."

"It isn't such a good room as yours, you know. Because of the position of the windows when the rooms were school dormitories, your present room turned out to be rather more commodious than the next one when we put up the

partitions. I don't know whether you've realised that you will be getting, if you move, a smaller room?"

"My room is so draughty," said Miss Lipscombe. "I really don't know why I've put up with it so long without complaining."

Wisely the prioress declined to discuss this aspect of the matter. That Miss Lipscombe was determined to change over rooms was perfectly clear and she thought she knew why. Sister Marcellus, less tactful, or perhaps less inhibited, put into words what the prioress had decided not to say.

"I suppose she thinks Mrs. Wilks's old room will tell her something she wants to know," she said. "She pokes into everybody's business, that one. Perhaps she thinks she will find a letter which has fallen between the floorboards, or something of interest stuffed up the chimney. It is a pity she does not find a hidden mousetrap and get her fingers caught in it. I've no patience with her nonsense, none at all."

"So large *la Biblia! La sagrada escritura*," said Mrs. Polkinghorne, as Miss Lipscombe lifted from the bottom of the Dutch wardrobe a massive tome with a brass clasp.

"It belonged to my grandfather. He was a Protestant," said Miss Lipscombe, bearing it with difficulty towards the door. So, bit by bit and capably assisted by Mrs. Polkinghorne, who saw no valid excuse for refusing to help her, Miss Lipscombe moved into the room vacated by Mrs. Wilks. There was very little to do. Mrs. Wilks had left her bed-linen neatly folded and it had been removed by Sister Mary Marcellus, so all that Miss Lipscombe needed to do was to make the bed with her own clean sheets and pillowcases and transfer her personal effects from the one room to the other.

Except that the room was appreciably narrower than the one she was leaving, it appeared to differ from it in no other

particular except that the basket chair creaked more protestingly than her own had done. This, however, could be remedied very easily by changing the chairs over.

With Mrs. Polkinghorne's help Miss Lipscombe was at last satisfied that the move was complete. Nothing now remained but to get rid of Mrs. Polkinghorne and begin her investigations.

Over one object Sister Marcellus had allowed her imagination to run away with her. There was no fireplace in the room and therefore no chimney. In the Spartan days of the boarding school the dormitories had been unheated. Since they had been converted into private rooms, however, a gas fire, with slot-meter, had been installed in each. Miss Lipscombe inspected this arrangement, but found nothing of interest.

Neither did the floorboards offer any scope. They were covered with cheap linoleum which had been firmly tacked down. There remained the bed itself, but here Miss Lipscombe's resolution failed her. She felt she could not face the prospect of unseaming a flock mattress, and why, after all, should Mrs. Wilks have concealed anything in her mattress which she was willing to leave behind—money, perhaps, or family papers? Thwarted and disappointed, Miss Lipscombe went over to the window and looked out. Like the window of the room she had vacated, it overlooked the convent car-park, from which there was open access to the road until the double gates were locked at dusk.

There was little more to be seen than from the window of her former pied-a-terre. Miss Lipscombe felt cheated. She had sacrificed a larger room for a smaller one, and had expended energy, especially in moving in her good chair and carrying out the one which appeared to resent having anybody sit in it.

Just as she was preparing to seat herself in her own good chair, she heard a slight sound at the window.

Turning quickly, she was in time to see the impudent face and round eyes of a boy who was looking into the room. As soon as he realised she had seen him, he made a rude gesture and ran off.

“Well, I declare!” exclaimed Miss Lipscombe. “I shall complain to the milkman! How dare he bring his son out with the milk van on Saturdays! The behaviour of children nowadays gets worse and worse!” She went to the window and threw up the lower sash. The bars were on the outside, so that the window could be opened. She grasped two of the bars and prepared to attract the milkman’s attention, but his van moved off before she could call out.

There was compensation, however. Mrs. Wilks’s room had held a secret, after all, although, even in her excitement at her discovery, Miss Lipscombe could hardly see at first what use Mrs. Wilks would ever have made of it. The fact was that the bars of the window were loose. Cautiously she tried them again and discovered that it was possible to lift the whole lot out at once. They formed a grid of sorts and this was slotted into the wooden window frame and was readily removable. What was more, it was only a step down from the window to the ground outside. “So she could get out of this room without having to use the front door or the kitchen garden door!” thought Miss Lipscombe. “The sinful old bag!” But then another and a less agreeable idea came to her. “But so anybody could get in, as well,” she said to herself. “I’d better let Tom Quince know, and ask Sister to tell him to fix these bars, otherwise I’ll never feel safe.”

“Them bars on Mrs. Wilks’s old window?” said Tom Quince. “Oh, yes, Miss, we knows all about *them*. Done in the war, they was, when the school had an air-raid shelter under the car-park and in the cellar. The headmistress and the prioress at that time—before Sister Hilary and Sister St. Elmo, of course—they wanted to make sure the kids in the dormitories could get out nice and easy, so them in your old room and your present one, which was all one big dormitory

in them days, was trained in air raid drill to hop out the winder, while them in Mrs. Polkinghorne's and Sister Ignatius's, which was also throwed into one, was to run out the front door into the shelter so as them in the dormitory on the next floor could come down the stairs and get into the cellar down the door in the cloister. I was gardener's lad at the time and I remember how it used to make me laugh, them kids all wrapped up in their overcoats and all hung about with their little gas-masks, practisin' jumping out the winder and two nuns outside ready to catch 'em if they come a mucker, though it's only about a foot and a half to the ground, as you can see. Mrs. Wilks, I reckon, used to sneak out that way and go to bingo, nights, in the village hall."

"That's very interesting, of course," said Miss Lipscombe stiffly, "but I don't like the idea that anybody can get into the house so easily. It's not very safe, is it?"

"Can't see who'd want to break into a convent, blowed if I can. Nothing worth pinching, is there?"

"Well, I'd like you to cement those bars in, all the same."

"I couldn't do that without the prioress said so."

"Well, you must ask her, then. I shan't sleep a wink at night until I know those bars are secure."

"P'raps she'd like me to come in at nights and make sure there's no burglars under her bed," said Tom to Sister Marcellus, with whom he permitted himself more liberties, or liberties of a different kind, than those he took with the other nuns.

"Anyway, it's no use to go to Mother," said Sister Marcellus, who was as much of a traditionalist as Sister Wolstan. "It's a structural alteration and might even have to be approved by the General Council. Besides, it might be very useful in case of fire."

“I’ll point that out to the old lady, then. My bet is she’ll clear off back into her old room. She only changed over so’s she could have a snoop round to see what the other old lady might have left behind.”

His prognostication turned out to be correct. Having heard him out and listened to his version of Sister Marcellus’s opinion on the subject of the bars, Miss Lipscombe, once more enlisting the aid of Mrs. Polkinghorne, moved back into her old room. She did not seek permission this time, arguing that this was unnecessary. There could be no objection to her moving back to where she felt she belonged.

So the basket chair, the bedding, the big Family Bible, and the other bits and pieces, were taken into their former domain, but for several nights Miss Lipscombe lay awake wondering whether she could hear sounds which indicated that the set of bars was being removed and an intruder was climbing into the convent.

“An old maid’s dream!” said Tom Quince sardonically to Sister Marcellus. “Present company excepted, of course, Sister,” he hastened to add. But Miss Lipscombe, back in her old room, was still not happy. There were those cellars under the ground floor and she sometimes thought that they were occupied.

There was another shot left in Miss Lipscombe’s locker. She let a week go by and then she went to the prioress and asked for Mrs. Wilks’s address.

“I’m afraid I can’t give it you,” said Sister St. Elmo. “She must write first, I think, but we have not heard from her since she moved.”

“She did not leave an address? But how very strange,” said Miss Lipscombe. “Suppose any letters come for her? How will they be sent on?”

The prioress shrugged her shoulders.

"The post office will see to it, no doubt." She did not add that Mrs. Wilks had asked her not to disclose the address.

"Oh, really? Well, I never! Some people do like to keep themselves to themselves, don't they?" said Miss Lipscombe disagreeably.

"They are not to be blamed for that, Miss Lipscombe. Sister Marcellus tells me that you have gone back to your old room," said the prioress, changing the subject.

"Yes, the other proved too small; besides, I found that people could get in. Those bars on the window . . ."

"But who would want to get in? There is nothing worth stealing in this house."

"You don't mind that I've moved back, do you, dear Mother?"

"Why should I, if *you* don't mind the draughts you mentioned?" retorted Sister St. Elmo.

"Draughts are better than being murdered in one's bed," said Miss Lipscombe. She retired from the presence, put on her hat and coat, and walked down the hill into the village. Her objective was the post office and general shop, but she was far too secretive to go to it straight away. She halted at the baker's, studied the bread and cakes in the window, went in, and purchased a couple of doughnuts; then she stood gazing into the draper's as though she were pricing up materials or deciding between skimpy little blouses and shoddy pullovers; the chemist's detained her next. She went in and bought a small tin of blackcurrant lozenges and discussed the weather. At last she sought out the post office. Here she bought half-a-dozen second-class stamps and then said brightly, referring to her purchase,

"I want to write to dear old Mrs. Wilks, you know. She left us just over a week ago and I do wonder how she's getting on in her new home."

"Yes, we heard she'd gone," said the postmistress. "Unfortunately she forgot to leave me her address. I expect

you've got it, though?"

"Me? No, I haven't got it. She didn't leave it with us and, even if she had, I couldn't pass it on without her permission," said the postmistress.

"Why ever not, Miss Hankin? You know what close friends Mrs. Wilks and I have been."

"That's as maybe, Miss Lipscombe. Perhaps the nuns have got the address. Why don't you ask them for it?"

"Oh, yes, of course," said Miss Lipscombe, unwilling to disclose that she had already tried this policy. She put the stamps carefully into her purse and walked out of the shop. Outside the door, when she had closed it behind her, she anxiously checked her money, although she knew all too well how little she had. She made up her mind as to her next step, closed her handbag with the purse inside it, and walked to the bus stop. Here she consulted the timetable, although she knew the times of the buses off by heart, and debated mentally whether it was worth while to take a bus to the town and try to obtain the address at the big sub-post office in the high street, where Mrs. Wilks, she concluded, must have left it, since it was not at the village post office.

Regretfully she thought of the number of counter clerks, always so busy, or apparently so; she thought of the queues of people with their savings books, their pension books, their interminable enquiries; she thought of Miss Hankin's declaration: *Not without permission*.

Dejectedly she returned to the convent.

CHAPTER 6

Repercussions

“But in the midst of this bright-shining day
I spy a black, suspicious, threatening cloud
...”

William Shakespeare

The next hint of a threatening cloud came in the form of two more anonymous letters, one addressed to the prioress, the other to Sister Hilary at the school. Neither was typical of the usual epistles of this sort. Neither contained threats, blasphemous epithets, filthy accusations, nor, indeed, gave any indication of mental instability on the part of the writer. The first said: “Madam Prioress, why did you turn that poor old lady from your door when she had done nothing wrong? Couldn’t she pay her way?”

The second read: “To the headmistress of the convent school what brane-wash little children keep your teachers and there cars out the village we do not want you nuns killing our kids.”

Both letters came by post. Sister Hilary showed hers to Sister Wolstan and said,

“It’s a pity Sister Raymund or Sister Romuald has to take Sister Marcellus into the town on a Saturday, because, of course, that is just the day when the village children are all over the place. The next thing, I suppose, will be stones

thrown at the car. The village never *has* liked us very much and there isn't a single Catholic family in it."

"By taking a longer route to the town the village can be avoided," Sister Wolstan pointed out.

"That seems a waste of time and petrol and, anyway, I don't like giving in. I'll show Sister St. Elmo the letter and see what she says."

At the convent Sister St. Elmo read her own letter and took it to the parlour, where she expected to find Miss Lipscombe and Mrs. Polkinghorne, who would have breakfasted but not yet gone out, supposing they intended to do so. She showed them the letter and, when both had read it, she said,

"Someone has hold of the wrong end of the stick. As you both know, Mrs. Wilks left this house entirely of her own accord. She told me she had been invited to make her home with relatives and naturally I was pleased on her behalf. If either of you is confronted with the sort of rumours which must have inspired the writer of this letter, I look to you to reject them and deny them. May I rely on you to do that?"

"It might be easier if we knew where these relations live," said Miss Lipscombe.

"Well, you don't. All the same, you both know that the suggestion conveyed in this letter is untrue and unjust."

"But that's just what we *don't* know," said Miss Lipscombe to Mrs. Polkinghorne when the prioress had left them. "And she didn't like the letter, did she? More than a grain of truth in it, I'd say."

"I do not believe the good *religiosas* would turn anyone away because she could not pay," objected Mrs. Polkinghorne. "Besides, Mrs. Wilks *did* pay. She had her pension, oh, yes, and money besides. And I think she went to live with people who had money, too. That was a very large car which came for her."

"So you remarked at the time. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to find out where she went. I asked at

the village post office and they didn't know. I didn't try the big post office in the town because they always have such long queues there, and I don't suppose they would give me her address, anyway."

"So what will you do?"

"That's my secret for the present. If it comes off, I'll let you know," said Miss Lipscombe.

She went along to her bedroom, humming a little tune. In the cloister she passed Sister Marcellus. The former lay-sister looked at her retreating back and said to herself, "That one is up to mischief. The prioress went to the parlour this morning. I wonder why she did that? And now that one comes along with a light step and singing. I don't like it. There is something afoot."

Upon reaching her room Miss Lipscombe wrote a letter. She addressed the envelope to Mrs. Wilks, care of the Post Office, High Street, and added under this the name of the town and county and along the top of the envelope she affixed one of the stamps she had bought at the village post office when she had made her abortive enquiry there for Mrs. Wilks's address. Then she walked into the village and posted the letter.

Middle Hour prayers at the convent were purposely kept short because they were arranged to coincide with the school dinner-hour, so that all the teaching nuns, unless they were on dinner duty or on an educational outing, could attend chapel. Lunch was an informal meal. It usually consisted of thick soup followed by a simple dish including fish on Wednesdays and Fridays. Before Sister Marcellus's journeys to the town had been restricted to Saturdays, the fish was apt to be herrings or mackerel soured in vinegar, but, pending the arrival of the large refrigerator with its deep-freeze compartment, sardines, tinned pilchards, and tinned herrings in tomato sauce had added interest to the Wednesday and Friday menus. Each nun helped herself to what there was, took a thick slice of bread, and at the end of

her meal she washed up her own plate, cutlery, and her glass which had held water, before she returned to school.

On this occasion the prioress said to the headmistress, when both had lunched,

“Come to my office, Sister. I want a word with you.”

“And I with you,” said Sister Hilary. “I’ve had a letter.”

“So have I. I imagine they are both on the same subject.”

This did not prove to be the case.

“It would be just as sensible to blame *you* for Mrs. Wilks’s abrupt departure and *me* for the accident to that unfortunate child,” said the prioress, “which only goes to show how idiotic both these letters are.”

“What do you propose to do about them?”

“There is nothing we can do. Both are unsigned, but, even if we knew who the writers are, I do not think it would be wise to make an issue of it. Both incidents will soon blow over and the less notice we take of letters like these the sooner any ill-feeling will die down. I think we ought to carry on as usual and appear to take no notice of your letter. I imagine it comes from the parents of the child. It can hardly express the common view. Sister Raymund was held to be blameless.”

“What about the Saturday shopping excursions to the town?” asked Sister Hilary. “Since the accident—at any rate, up to last Saturday—Miss Webb, the gymnastics mistress, has kindly undertaken the shopping in her own car; but we cannot impose upon her again. Besides, on Tuesday Sister Romuald went to the town with you and Sister Marcellus. There was no trouble when driving through the village on the way to town, was there?”

“None. But it wasn’t on a Saturday, of course. All the same, to give in and go to the town by a circuitous route on Saturdays would look as though we acknowledged the guilt that the writer of the letter attaches to us and we cannot continue to shop on Tuesdays.”

"Has a circuitous route been suggested?"

"Yes, it has. Sister Wolstan thought it might be a good idea for our own car to avoid the village on Saturdays for a bit."

"To my mind that is a mistaken view, but Sister Raymund and Sister Romuald are the people most concerned. Has either of them expressed an opinion?"

"No. Their opinion was not required, although I have shown them the letter. You had better question them."

"Oh, I know they will do as they're told. Very well, then, they shall take the Saturday shopping excursions as before, and we will ignore the letter."

The dissenter from this proposal was Sister Marcellus.

"If I am martyred in that Saturday car," she said grandly, "it will be to the glory of God, for I shall die doing my duty in the service of you all. I shall die like a true soldier of the Church, doing my duty. All I want to know is this: is it necessary? Must I be martyred for the sake of a few groceries?"

"Oh, Sister, don't talk such nonsense," said the prioress. "You will go into the town for the shopping just as you used to do, and Sister will be at the wheel. There is no question of your being murdered. We cannot continue to impose on Miss Webb's good nature, and nothing happened when you went shopping last Tuesday."

"I said *martyred*, Sister."

"I know. It comes to the same thing, apparently, in your opinion, and I won't have it expressed. You are very fortunate in having a car to take you to the shops and bring you and the shopping home, so let us hear no more about it."

"Sister St. Elmo tests my obedience to the limit," said Marcellus to Sister Romuald. "Do you think they will stone the car, Sister?"

"Oh, no, of course not. Why should they? They didn't last Tuesday. Everyone knows that we were not to blame for

the accident. Before the hearing it was thought best that we should not drive through the village on a Saturday, but that is all over now. We have been absolved publicly from blame and, now that is the case, while you are doing the shopping next time I have Sister's permission to drive to the hospital and enquire after the poor child who was hurt."

There was a slight demonstration in the village on the following Saturday, but it was short lived. Five school-age boys spread out across the street opposite the post office so that the car could not pass. Sister Mary Romuald, who was driving, pulled up and got out.

"You are obstructing me," she said, "and that is against the law. Please go away."

The boys replied to this with obscenities and rude gestures, but they scattered and ran off as the village policeman advanced on the scene. He opened the door of the car for Sister Romuald to get back to her seat and saluted respectfully.

"I had a call from your place, madam," he said, when she thanked him. "One of the ladies said she'd had a funny kind of a letter, so she thought she'd better warn me you were coming this way, as there might be a bit of trouble. I know where two of them boys live and I'll have a word with their parents. You won't be troubled again, I'll see to that."

"What a mercy that policeman happened to be about," said Sister Marcellus, as the car went on its way. "Quite providential, really."

But although Sister Hilary, who had telephoned the village policeman, could ensure safe conduct for the convent car, and although there were no more demonstrations, the anonymous letters continued to arrive.

"Aren't you even troubling to find out how that poor old lady is faring since you turned her so unkindly from your door?" said the next letter addressed to the prioress. A later

one went further. "How do you know that those who took away that poor old party haven't murdered her for her money?" it asked.

The next letter to Sister Hilary harped on the theme of the accident to the child.

"No thanks to you and yours as a poor mite was not done to death. You never even went to see her in the hospital nor took her no flowers nor sweets. Not for nothing is your lot called the Scarlett Women."

"I suppose the writers will get tired of all this in time, if we take no notice," said Sister Hilary, having instructed Sister Wolstan to destroy the letter. "We must just put up with this persecution, I suppose, until they get tired of the game. I wish the writer knew that we were advised *not* to visit the child in hospital until after the court proceedings. I felt at the time that it made us seem rather heartless, but counsel was adamant. And Sister Romuald *did* go to the hospital as soon as things were settled, but the child had been discharged."

"It is a pity Sister did not think of asking for her home address," said Sister Wolstan.

"Yes, perhaps, but it's rather late in the day for that to be thought of. Have you typed out that list of properties we shall need for the summer play? I must see Sister Fabian about a back-cloth for the stage in case the weather turns wet and Miss Grey can't have the play out of doors as she wants to do."

"I think it's a very chancy matter to put on an evening show out of doors in this climate. Even if it doesn't rain, it may turn cold, and some of the children are to be dressed as fairies. They are sure to catch a chill."

"I'll have a look at the sketches Sister Fabian has made for the costumes. The parents won't want children home for the holidays with streaming colds. I'm glad you mentioned the fairies."

"Those letters," said Sister Wolstan, reverting to the previous subject.

"Yes?"

"Have you studied the postmarks on the envelopes?"

"Not many of them are very clear," Sister Hilary answered. "Those I have been able to make out indicate that the letters are posted in the town, but if they come from the child's parents they could be posted in the village, couldn't they, and carried to the town to be marked and sorted? But why do you ask about the postmarks? Are you suggesting that, after all, we try to track down the writer? If she wanted her name known she would sign the letters. Besides, I'm sure it's the mother. Nobody else would bother. In any case, the child's injuries were not serious, thank God. We need not feel guilty, I'm sure."

"But the letters make me uneasy. The prioress gets anonymous letters, too."

"Yes, not about the same thing, though. Hers are all about Mrs. Wilks, who left the house behind what appears to be a veil of secrecy."

"Oh, perhaps that's too strong a way of expressing it," said Sister Wolstan. "I think she only wanted to keep her new address secret from old Miss Lipscombe. I don't want to seem uncharitable, but Miss Lipscombe is what in my early days I should have called a nosey parker. What I was going to suggest is that we tackle the child's parents and make mention of calling in the police if the letters don't stop coming."

"I hardly think we are in a position to utter threats. The letters are not actionable."

"Well, no, they are not scurrilous, I suppose. All the same, they are a nuisance. Besides, I've been thinking things over, and I'm not sure the child's parents are involved."

"Surely they are by far the most likely people to send such letters to the school?"

"I hardly think so. Your letters and those of the prioress—she shows them to the rest of us—are written on exactly the same kind of notepaper and enclosed in the same kind of envelope. I have compared them most carefully. I took your last letter over to the convent before I obeyed your orders and destroyed it."

"Everybody uses the same kind of stationery nowadays," said the headmistress. "The village shop only keeps one kind, I expect. But what are you asking me to believe?"

"That both sets of letters are written by the same person. Oh, I know that yours are illiterate and badly spelt and that those which go to the convent are far superior in these respects, but surely it is too much of a coincidence if *two* anonymous letter-writers live in our neighbourhood?"

"I see what you mean, but coincidences do occur and I can readily believe that one has occurred here."

"You think there *are* two anonymous letter-writers, then?"

"Yes. What is more, I could name them. One is the mother or the father of the injured child, as we've said. The other, well, no names no packdrill, as we used to say in my unregenerate days, but there is one old busybody not so far from this room who has lost her sparring partner and greatly resents the fact. Well, now, you'll let me have that list of properties, won't you? Oh, and ask Miss Grey (don't forget Sister Fabian) to come and see me as soon as she has a free period. I must see about those fairies."

Someone else was interested in the postman's visits besides the Sisters, but day after day went by and Miss Lipscombe received no reply to her letter to Mrs. Wilks.

"Still, she must have *got* it," said Miss Lipscombe to Mrs. Polkinghorne, "because I put the address of the

convent on it and it would have come back if the post office couldn't deliver it."

"But if she wish you to write, she leave you her address of her new home," Mrs. Polkinghorne pointed out, not for the first time. "She leave you no address, so she do not wish letters. I see it like that."

"Well, I do not. She didn't leave her address because, for no doubt a very good reason, she did not want those prying nuns to get hold of it. Perhaps that is why she doesn't answer. All the letters that come here are taken straight to Sister St. Elmo and she doles them out. I haven't the slightest doubt she has a good look and a good feel and maybe a good smell at each one before we're allowed to have our own."

"Is that what you would do if the letters came to you and not to her?" asked Mrs. Polkinghorne, who liked and respected the nuns and had little liking and no respect at all for Miss Lipscombe. Miss Lipscombe gazed at her suspiciously, but the large dark Spanish eyes seemed to express nothing but gentle enquiry, so she gave a little snort of contempt and resumed her position at the window so that she could be the first to see the postman crossing the convent car-park.

However, no letter came for her and she made up her mind to allow a couple of weeks to pass and then to try again. Meanwhile the school summer play was performed, met with its usual success, and nobody caught cold. This last was possibly accounted for in that Sister Mary Hilary, having vetted the costume designs, faced Sister Mary Fabian and Miss Petrella Grey with alternatives. If the play, floodlit by courtesy of a papa who was vaguely stated to be "in the business" was to be presented out of doors and by night, the fairies were to wear their school green pullovers and their green gymnasium knickers under their fairy frocks and put shoes on their feet; otherwise, if bare arms and feet

and very light underclothing were to be the order of the day, the play was to be presented indoors.

The producer and the wardrobe mistress were saddened by this request, which they thought unreasonable, but they knew better than to argue with Sister Mary Hilary. However, a heavy downpouring of thundery rain settled the matter to the satisfaction of all parties. The play was performed on the school stage against an arresting back-cloth designed by Sister Mary Fabian and executed dashing by the Second Form art class, the diaphanous fairy frocks were unhampered by thick green pullovers or gymnasium shorts and a good time was had by all, including the prioress, (who attended by right of office), Sister Marcellus, (for once so good-humoured and uncritical that she applauded everything including the unrehearsed incidents inescapable in any amateur production), old Sister Ignatius, and the two elderly paying guests. Even Father MacNicol's saturnine countenance lighted up and his musical bass lent body to those songs in which the audience was asked to participate.

It was at the play, however, that another anonymous communication was delivered, and this time it did not come by post. Sister Mary Hilary found it tucked into her copy of the programme. There was no doubt about its being intended for her because, as headmistress, it was well known that she was always given an armchair in the exact middle of the front row.

The prioress was always given the seat on her right, Father MacNicol the chair on her left. Old Sister Ignatius was always put at the end of the row, in case she needed to be taken out during the proceedings, and Sister Marcellus was there to attend to her. The rest of the front row was allotted to the more important of the parents. The staff, with the exception of Sister Romuald, who was at the piano, and Sister Fabian, the prompter, were behind the scenes, the women to help with costumes and make-up and to keep

down the noise made by a large and excited cast, the men to manage the lights and set up the scenery.

The note dropped out as Sister Mary Hilary opened her programme. She read it and her black brows came together ominously. When the play was over and the nuns had had a late supper, she showed it to the prioress.

"That settles it, in my opinion," she said. "The writer is somebody connected with the school or the house. I am inclined to believe it's the latter."

"Miss Lipscombe," said the prioress, "if you are right. What makes you so sure that it is somebody who lives here?"

"I think it would be impossible for a person from the village to get into the school, put a letter inside the programme intended for me, and escape without being detected. Somebody did it who had a right to be in the hall. Surely it couldn't be one of the parents, could it?"

"I should hardly think so. You know, it reminds me just a little of that very first letter we received."

"The one about the woodwork centre?"

"Yes."

"The sender this time has used print though, not her own printed capitals. It may not be the same person."

"Well, I'm determined to get to the bottom of it. If I can't find out who sends the things, perhaps I can find some way of choking her off. We can't go on putting up with these accusations against ourselves. Why should we? This letter is scurrilous, in my opinion."

"Our remedy, I suppose, is to take it to the police, but I think we might try other measures before we do that."

"Have you any ideas for trying other measures? I am not at all anxious to bring the police in. We don't want that sort of publicity."

"I agree. Well, I do have a plan." She told the prioress what it was and then added, "What do you think? Is it worth trying?"

“Oh, anything is worth trying, Sister. After all, we don’t want to show the poor creature up. We merely want to put a stop to the letters.”

“Very well, then. We’ll see what happens after the tennis tournament.”

After the tennis tournament the secular staff always entertained the nuns and the paying guests to a sumptuous tea, and it was at this festive gathering that Sister Mary Hilary made her announcement. Ostensibly she was speaking only to Sister Wolstan and the prioress, but at the sound of her slightly raised voice the other conversations suddenly stopped, as they have a habit of doing when the head of a school begins to speak.

“I’ve been thinking over those nuisance-letters,” she said, “and I’ve decided we ought to call in the police. The writer can’t live all that far away and the police will soon lay hands on her.”

“I suggested that course some time ago,” said Sister Wolstan, also speaking very clearly and giving the impression that she had received a cue, as indeed she had. “The poor creature must be mentally afflicted, of course, so it should not mean a prison sentence, but there are other means of restraint which she may like even less.”

The headmistress nodded and, after a pause, conversation became general again.

“Anything strike you at teatime?” asked Bevis Fletcher, mathematics, of Gilbert Murphy, physics and chemistry, as they were driving away from the school that afternoon in Fletcher’s car.

“Stuck out a mile,” said Gilbert. “The boss was getting at somebody who was among those present. Our secretary-bird had been tipped to sing the responses. Whom do you think they had in mind?”

"The old girl with the dingle-dangle earrings, I suppose. Spanish, isn't she? I was watching her and I saw her jaw drop."

"What was it all about, do you suppose?"

"Nuisance-letters, the boss said. Anonymous muck sent through the post. Probably about that village kid who got run over. But the nuns won't bring in the police. That was just a bit of bluff, you know, to scare the old woman into calling it a day."

"Anonymous letters? What? Sent to the convent?"

"Not to the convent, I think; merely to the school. Wonder what was in them?"

"The usual nasty insinuations, I suppose. Anonymous letter-writers always run to type, I believe."

"The only typewriter is in Sister Wolstan's office," said Bevis, grinning.

"Well, I'm blest!" said Petrella Grey, dance and drama, to Nancy Webb, physical education and games. "What on earth was all *that* about, I wonder?"

"I'm surprised at you. Do you usually listen to private conversations?"

"Well, you seem to have done the same, or you wouldn't know what I'm talking about."

"Did *you* write rude letters to the nuns, darling?"

"No, but, seriously, Nancy, is that accident in the village having repercussions, do you think?"

"It sounded like it. Our revered head-mum has wind-up, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, anonymous letters aren't much fun. We had an outbreak of them in my former home town a year or so back, and there were two attempted suicides and one woman left her husband and children and went into hiding."

"The suicides were only *attempted*, you say, and perhaps the woman was glad of an excuse to leave home,

anyway.”

“So them’s your cynical sentiments, are they? Anyway, one thing is certain: Sister Hilary won’t call in the police. She knows where the letters come from and she was getting at somebody who was present at the tea-party.”

“One of *us*, do you mean?”

“Much more likely to have been one of those two old dears who have guest rooms in the convent.”

“Oh, surely not? I’ll tell you who else could have heard her, and that’s Mrs. Riggs and Mrs. French. They were in and out of the staff room all the time.”

“What! Our ultra-respectable school cleaner and the school cook? Oh, come, now!”

“Well, you never know, do you?”

“But they’re both married women with families. Poison-pens are always repressed spinsters with hidden yearnings.”

“Well, I’m one of those, so what?”

“Thank goodness that’s over for a few weeks,” said Ronald Chasset, simple woodwork, to his mother. “What with people writing stinking letters to the school and being threatened with the police—the *last* thing I want, when you think of father—and girls who hammer in screws and girls who think a nice strong bit of sticky tape is preferable to dove-tailing a joint, and a convent that’s always got a little job of carpentering to be done or a picture frame to be mended or a leg to be put back on to a chair, my life isn’t worth living at that place. Why, Mother, even the private jobs I do don’t come to enough to keep a wife.”

“She could always have a job of her own, dear, until the babies begin to come along.”

“Yes, and what then? And, anyway, what about you? You couldn’t live on your old age pension if I left home, could you?—or even if I brought my wife to live here.”

“Perhaps I could go and live in the convent, like the other ladies. I taught in that school before you were born,” said his mother, “and I lived in the convent in those days because most of the staff were resident. It’s because I’m an ex-teacher there that they gave you your job. I’m sure Sister St. Elmo would take me in, if I asked her.”

“No, no, Mother! I couldn’t have that! I couldn’t let you live in the convent!” cried her son, aghast. “There are reasons, good reasons. Promise me you won’t think of it any more.”

“But I don’t want to be a millstone round your neck, dear.”

“You’re not. You couldn’t be. Promise me, Mother! Please promise me on your sacred oath that you won’t go and live in that convent.”

CHAPTER 7

The Convent Is Haunted

“You never heard, did you, of a real ghost at a private school?
I thought not; nobody has that ever I came across.”

M. R. James

The last three days of the summer term were, as always, chaotic. Classes rioted joyously while form mistresses went to the headmistress's study with last-minute reports to be signed and while the following term's schedules of work were finalised; stock was collected and counted; cupboards, drawers, and desks were tidied up; the Sixth Form and the Upper Fifth held coffee parties; and the First and Second Forms, under the mild eye of Sister Honorius, squabbled and wept over who was to be given charge of rabbits and hamsters for the holidays and who would be allowed to come daily to school to feed the ducks and help Tom Quince and Sister Honorius look after the pigs and the goat.

The Lower Fifth decided to bring picnic meals to be eaten on the field instead of taking school dinners; not to be outdone, the Upper Fourth brought record-players and organised an unauthorised dance in the gymnasium, while the Lower Fourth, claiming half the available space there, ran an equally unauthorised auction sale of the goods and chattels that they had filched from the Upper Fifth prefect

who had been responsible for collecting lost property during the term. The Third Form muscled in on this and demanded a share of the proceeds and a disgraceful mêlée was broken up by the appearance of Sister Wolstan, who confiscated the cash takings, took the names of the chief combatants, and threatened to report both forms to Sister Hilary, a threat unlikely to be carried out so near the end of term.

Breaking-up day came in time to save the more sensitive members of staff from having a nervous breakdown and Sister Hilary went to see the prioress as soon as school was dismissed.

"I've got to keep the two Cartwrights for at least the first fortnight of the holidays," she said. "There is infectious illness at their home and their mother doesn't want them back until it's cleared up."

"Oh, well," said Sister St. Elmo, "we must put a second bed into what was Mrs. Wilks's room, that's all. There are the former teachers' beds upstairs. Get Tom Quince and one of the school gardeners to bring one down for you."

"Just as you wish, but wouldn't it be simpler to give the children two of the upstairs rooms?"

"No. For one thing, the beds up there will have to be thoroughly aired before anybody can sleep in them, and it is easier to air one bed in the kitchen and then put it in Mrs. Wilks's old room than to bring two beds down, air them and take them upstairs again. Apart from that, we are to have Father O'Regan, from Ulster, who needs a rest. He won't want a couple of schoolgirls running about on that floor and perhaps disturbing him."

"I see. Very well, then, Sister. They can take their midday meal in the school dining-hall. They are quite old enough to get their own breakfasts, teas, and snack suppers and eat them in the parlour here, and Mrs. French is willing to give them their cooked dinners over at school. She has to get something for the extra school cleaners anyway, so there is no real problem if the children are only to be here

for a fortnight. After that, Mrs. French goes on holiday and the extra cleaners will have finished scrubbing out and all the rest of the work, so then we may have to cope."

"Well, let us hope the fortnight will see us through. You will have a word with the children about being very quiet when they are in their room, won't you? I don't want to give Miss Lipscombe cause for complaint. She won't like having children next door to her, in any case, so I don't wish to give her any legitimate reason for coming and bothering me, as she is only too apt to do. By the way, what about bathrooms, and so on, for these little girls?"

"They can use the school accommodation. There is no need for them to get in anybody's way over here."

"I had better tell Sister Marcellus to let them have a chamber pot, just in case, though, don't you think? They can't go over to school if they need relief during the night."

"Well, what do you think!" said Miss Lipscombe, a couple of days later. "I have had an answer from Mrs. Wilks at last."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Polkinghorne. "I did not see that you had a letter. Is Mrs. Wilks in good health?"

"I suppose so. She says she is very happy and asks me to write as often as I can."

"That is strange she should think of you after so much time," said Mrs. Polkinghorne. ("You old *mentirosa*," she added in her thoughts.)

"Oh, she says she has been very busy settling in at her new home," pursued Miss Lipscombe, continuing blithely with what Mrs. Polkinghorne knew were lies.

"Ah, yes. You will remember me to her when you write?"

"Oh, yes, but I can't give you her address. She does not put it in the letter. I am to write in care of the post office."

"Strange, is it not?"

"Why do you keep saying that? It is not strange at all. She says she does not want Sister St. Elmo to know where

she is."

"Why not?"

"Well," said Miss Lipscombe, lowering her voice, "she left the convent because she owed them money, you know. She left under a cloud."

"She went off in that big car, owing money?"

"Oh, do forget the big car!" said Miss Lipscombe testily. "What has that to do with it? I expect she hired it herself just to annoy the nuns. It would be quite like her to do something of the sort. And, talking of annoyance, I am going to complain. How dare they put two noisy, rackety children in the room next to mine?"

"They are very good children," protested Mrs. Polkinghorne. "I have spoken to them and they are very polite and nice."

"All a veneer until they get used to us. There won't be a minute's peace later on, you mark my words. I shall speak to Sister about it."

The Sister she spoke to was Marcellus, in whom she found a ready sympathiser.

"We keep our own rooms clean and tidy," said Marcellus, "and so do you and Mrs. Polkinghorne. The school cleaners see to the hall and the passages. Sister Leo and Sister Romuald keep the chapel clean and polished. I do the cooking and the marketing. Do I complain? No. But these children are not to clean their room and always they will open the window and let in the dust and dirt from the car-park. They will get in my way in the kitchen and make a mess and not wash up their cups and plates as they should. I know what children are like."

"But they will take meals over at the school," said Mrs. Polkinghorne, who was present.

"Not their breakfast," said Sister Marcellus. "The school is not unlocked for the cleaners until ten o'clock, so they are to take their breakfast over here, *and* their tea *and* their supper, let me tell you, and in *our* parlour, too!"

“Really!” exclaimed Miss Lipscombe. “Oh, well, if they have permission from the prioress, I suppose there is nothing we can do. I know it will get on my nerves, though, and when anything gets on my nerves I can’t sleep and my health suffers.”

“Well, I do not mind the children,” said Mrs. Polkinghorne, “so why do you not change rooms with me while they are here?”

“Change my room again?”

“Just as you wish. It only means changing my sheets for yours.”

As though she were the person granting the favour, Miss Lipscombe agreed upon the exchange of rooms and moved in next door to old Sister Mary Ignatius so that the children, who were aged nine and eleven, had Mrs. Polkinghorne instead of Miss Lipscombe for neighbour.

For the first week of their stay at the convent the little girls were happy enough. Every morning two or more of the lower school turned up to feed the animals and each afternoon Sister Mary Romuald took the Cartwrights out in the convent car, although she avoided the village, where the village children were on school summer holiday. At the beginning of the second week, however, she went on leave and as Sister Mary Raymund, although she had passed her test, was not anxious to take out two lively little girls, the afternoon outings ceased.

The flow of animal lovers also petered out until the only faithful helper was a child of morbid imagination who said, on the Tuesday morning of the second week:

“I should be scared to stay in the convent at nights. Aren’t *you* scared?”

“Never thought about it,” said the eleven-year-old.

“*I’m* not scared,” said her sister.

“Well, I would be,” said the other child. “There’s somebody comes creeping into the convent car-park at nights and stares at people through the windows, and his

face is all green and he's got fangs, just like a wolf, and horrible bloodshot eyes. They say he's a ghost."

"Who cares? The nuns wouldn't let him get in. Besides, we always draw the curtains. Well, Sister Marcellus does, actually, after we're in bed, and the prioress comes in and says goodnight and blesses us, so sucks to you and your silly old green-faced ghost. You were pretty green yourself when you ate too much at last year's form party, so there!"

Brave words spoken in the full morning light of a sunny July day, but more sombre feelings prevailed when night was nigh. Sister Marcellus, coming in, as usual, to draw the curtains, said,

"Why, you've drawn your curtains yourselves! You must wait for me. You'll bring them down if you tug at them and *then* what will you do? *I* can't climb up and fix them!"

"We were ever so careful," said the older child. "We didn't want anybody looking in."

"Looking in? How could there be anybody looking in?"

"Sister, the convent isn't haunted, is it?" asked the younger child.

"You get into bed and don't ask silly questions." Sister Marcellus gave a tweak to the curtains and went out, muttering under her breath. She was not, however, as unsympathetic as might have been supposed. Long residence in the convent had not eradicated the frightening superstitions and the bogeyman threats which had been part of her peasant childhood. She went to the prioress, but without mentioning the child's question. What she said was:

"Is there any chance that some man or other gets in to the car-park at night and looks in at the downstairs windows before the curtains are drawn, Mother?"

"What makes you ask that, Sister?" asked the prioress, giving her a hard stare.

"Those two children are frightened. They have spoken to me and asked whether the house is haunted."

"Oh, young children are very silly."

"But they really are alarmed, Mother Prioress. I don't question it for one moment. I know genuine fright when I see it."

"Would they be happier with a night-light? We always let Sister Ignatius have one because sometimes she has to get up in the night and use her commode. I could easily let the children have one of her small candles. I always keep a box of them in stock."

"I don't like those movable bars on the window of that room, either," went on Marcellus. "If there is a prowler, he could get in, and one hears of such dreadful things the insane will do to children; yes, and not only to children. There are the rest of us to consider, if there is an evil-minded person in the neighbourhood. I haven't forgotten my experience in our car in the village."

"I don't really see that anybody could get into the car-park at night," objected the prioress. "Tom Quince has orders to lock the gates at sunset, and I am sure we can rely on him to do so."

"Well, I would be happier in my mind if I could be sure he *does* lock the gates. Those children are alone and unprotected and, as they are determined to leave their window open at the top at night, the same as they do at home, anybody could get in."

"I'll speak to Tom about the gates, though I'm sure your fears are without foundation."

This was not the end of the matter. A few minutes after Sister Marcellus had gone, the prioress had another visitor. This time it was Miss Lipscombe.

"I have no wish to complain," she said. "We all have our cross to bear, but must we have two rackety children on our floor, dear Mother?"

"I have not found them rackety."

"Ah, but your office and the Community Room are a long way off, and your other rooms are upstairs."

"I will speak to the children and make sure they do not disturb you."

"That is all very well, but they have their meals in the parlour with us and chatter all the time."

"About that I can do nothing, as you are well aware. I cannot and will not impose a silence rule upon young children."

"Oh, well, that may be so, but there is another thing about it."

"Really?" said the prioress, conveying disapproval and a certain degree of impatience. "And what is that?"

"Ever since I discovered, quite by accident, that the bars to that window in Mrs. Wilks's old room are removable, I have never thought that anybody was safe in there. I know I was glad enough to move out of it."

"Well, there was never any real need for you to move into it, was there?" said Sister St. Elmo mildly, but with a glint in her eye. "It was entirely by your own wish that you changed over."

"I did not know about the bars at that time." Plainly dissatisfied as a result of the interview, Miss Lipscombe took herself off, but the two visits, coming one on top of the other, had slightly shaken Sister St. Elmo's self-confidence. She reflected that the children themselves must have said something to Sister Marcellus and there was also the fact that at their own home they were accustomed to sleep upstairs and therefore might very well feel nervous on the ground floor and in a strange house.

When she went in that evening to say goodnight and to bless them before they went to sleep, she said, "I've been wondering whether you would like to have two dear little rooms on the floor above this one. They are rooms that the school staff used to have when we had a boarding school. What do you think?"

"Oh, Mother! Oh, you, Mother!" they said. "May we move up there *thank* tomorrow?"

"Yes, if Sister Marcellus can find time to get your beds moved upstairs. Of course you won't be together, you know, but the rooms will be next door to one another, and I shall be on the same floor along another corridor."

"Oh, Mother! It will be *lovely*!" they said.

"I wonder whether they *have* seen or heard something which has alarmed them?" thought Sister St. Elmo; then she dismissed the idea and sent for Tom Quince.

Appealed to, Tom convinced her that he never failed to lock the car-park gates, but added, "There'd be nothing to stop anybody sneaking in before dusk and hiding among the trees and bushes in the school garden, though, and there's no way of shutting the school parking. I'll take a look round tonight. But I reckon it's only one of these tales as always goes round a school, Sister, among kids of that age. Like to frighten one another, they do. Mind you, if there *is* some hanky-panky going on, Sister, some of them village lads is my guess. I'm taking my ashplant with me when I does the rounds tonight, and heaven help 'em if I catches anybody—that is if heaven's interested in 'em, the little scallywags. It's all on account of that accident in the village, I don't doubt. Any excuse will do 'em to get into mischief on other people's property."

Early next morning Quince went again to the prioress.

"I just seen Mrs. Riggs, as cleans out Sister Hilary's study and Sister Wolstan's little den and the staffroom and that, and she reports as the study is turned all upside down, she never see it in such a state, and all the papers in the filing cabinet on the floor and all the drawers in Sister's desk been rummaged through, and all like that, and the same in the seckertary's office, which is to say Sister Wolstan's little cubby-hole next the front door."

"Oh dear! Does Sister Hilary know?"

"Not yet. Thought I'd come to you first, Sister."

"I had better get Sister Hilary and Sister Wolstan to go over to the school to see whether anything is missing. I

suppose whoever it was was hoping to find money. I trust that you told the cleaner not to touch anything?"

"I did, Sister. 'This'll be a police matter,' I says, 'and they've got to see everything exactly as it is,' I says. 'Fingerprints and all that,' I says." He looked modestly pleased with himself.

"Good," said Sister St. Elmo. She went to the Community Room and sent the Sisters concerned over to the school. "Don't tidy up," she said, "but just check to find out what is missing and what damage, if any, has been done, and then I shall call in the police."

The checking took some time. When their report came in, it was a strange one and, for some reason she could not have explained, Sister St. Elmo found it perturbing, for no damage had been done and nothing appeared to be missing.

"If it was money they were after, of course they didn't find any," said the headmistress. "All school money was collected and banked on the last day of term. Sister Romuald will testify to that, as she took it to town in the car. So far as I can tell, except for the untidy state in which the place was left, and the nuisance it will be to get my filing-cabinet in order again, no harm has been done." She made way for Sister Wolstan, whose report was almost, but not quite, the same. Sister Wolstan, like her headmistress, was conscientious and painstaking to a degree, as anybody who had been trained in the novitiate of the Companions of the Poor was almost bound to be. She had ferreted and probed and searched and was ready to declare that only one thing had been removed from the secretary's little room.

"I hope it isn't the typewriter," said Sister St. Elmo, rather anxiously mentioning this expensive item. It was not the typewriter. The missing article—"and I've checked *everything*, positively everything, Sister"—was the list of names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the secular

staff, all of whom lived away from the school and the convent and were now on holiday.

“There is only one thing *that* can mean,” said Sister St. Elmo. “More of these wretched anonymous letters, I suppose. I shall have to bring the police in, as it’s a case of breaking and entering, but I doubt whether they’re going to thank me, as nothing has been damaged or anything of intrinsic value stolen.”

Before she could put her resolution into practice she received another report that confirmed her, however, in her resolve to inform the police that the school had had unauthorised visitors. The report came from Mrs. Polkinghorne and Miss Lipscombe, who had waited their turn to speak with the prioress. She took them to the convent parlour, for seculars were not admitted to the Community Room.

“If it’s about the little Cartwrights,” she said warningly, “you surely must know that they slept upstairs last night and could not have disturbed you.”

“And thankful we are to know that they *did* sleep upstairs,” said Miss Lipscombe earnestly. “I have said my say about them in the past, but not any more. Why, the poor mites might not be alive today if they had slept on the ground floor. Mrs. Polkinghorne, dear, tell Sister what you heard last night.”

“It is true, I think, that somebody climbed into the room from which you removed the little girls,” said Mrs. Polkinghorne. “As perhaps you know, I moved next to that room because Miss Lipscombe thought the *niñas* might disturb her. Well, I do not always sleep so good, and I think I hear strange sounds from that room.”

“So what did you do?”

“I put my head under the bed-covers and pray to the Blessed Virgin,” said Mrs. Polkinghorne piously and without shame.

"It might have been better to have turned the key of the room. It was left on the corridor side when the room was vacated. Anyway, you should have roused the household and let some of us deal with the intruder, if indeed there was one."

"And frighten poor Sister Ignatius into her grave?" exclaimed Miss Lipscombe, breaking in. "It could not be done. Besides, I heard the man getting out again. I do think, Sister, that something should be done about those loose bars."

"Yes," said Sister St. Elmo, who would not have credited a word of their story had she not known that the school had already been broken into, "you appear to be justified, Miss Lipscombe, in suggesting that. However, it may interest you to know that the intruder, whoever he was, mistook the building he was looking for, and made his exit, as you say you heard him do, as soon as he realised his mistake, so you and Mrs. Polkinghorne were never in danger."

"You mean he mistook the convent for the school?"

"We think so, but no damage has been done. You had better know that some mischievous village boys, we think, got into the school and left a lot of litter about, but that can soon be put right. However, I will think about having those loose bars cemented in, although I am not at all anxious to do it, because that room is an exit in case of fire."

"Well!" said Miss Lipscombe, when the prioress had gone and they had the convent parlour to themselves.

"What do you think of that?"

"I think I am glad when those bars are made firm," said Mrs. Polkinghorne. "Do you think it was *secuestrar*—I mean high-jack—those children?"

"You mean kidnap them? Well, now, that is just what I think myself. Such a lot of this kidnapping goes on. I wonder whether Sister got wind of what was likely to happen, and that's why she moved the children upstairs?" They wagged their heads solemnly over the question. "Knowing that the

children had been left here,” went on Miss Lipscombe, warming to her theme, “they tried the school first, only to be foiled. This made them angry, so they did as much damage and made as much mess as they could out of revenge for being thwarted. The world is in a sad pickle, Mrs. Polkinghorne, when miscreants dare to break into a convent to kidnap children.”

Mrs. Polkinghorne remarked,

“Mess, perhaps, the *intruso* he make, yes, but Sister say no damage. No damage, so no police, do you think?”

“Police?”

“No children this *secuestrador* get, and no damage done. Perhaps something was stolen, though.”

“Sister would have told us if there had been anything taken. If nothing has gone, there would be no need for the police, as you say. Oh, well, I think I’ll go back to my room and write my letters. What are you going to do?”

“I think I take the bus into town and drink a coffee and eat a cake there. You will be busy writing your letters, so I do not disturb you to ask you to join me.”

“You wouldn’t have asked me, in any case, not intending to treat me, you mean old gipsy,” thought Miss Lipscombe venomously, as she went tramping along the corridor in her cheap old shoes to occupy herself as she had indicated.

“You will write one letter too many in God’s good time, you old *bruja*,” thought Mrs. Polkinghorne, thus numbering herself, with King Saul, among the prophets.

CHAPTER 8

The Nuns Are Perplexed

"I am bubbled, I'm bubbled, O how I am
troubled!
Bamboozled and bit, my distresses are
doubled!"

John Gay

At the end of their second week the little Cartwrights went home. For several days they had seemed distressed and unhappy. Sister St. Elmo put it down to homesickness and thought no more about it. The last of the school volunteers gave up coming to feed the animals, so Tom Quince and Sister Honorius were left alone to cope. Nuns went on leave and other nuns returned from it and no more anonymous communications came to the convent.

Sister Hilary and Sister Wolstan spent whole mornings over at the school checking lists, rearranging classes and making alterations on the school timetable of which, when it was settled and approved, Sister Wolstan would make a fair copy before term began. As for the police, called in by Sister St. Elmo, they came and went, unable to do more than leave advice about fitting mortice locks and making sure that gates were locked and ground floor windows at the school were closed at night.

The prioress was summoned to a three-day conference at the Mother House of the Order and took Sister Elphege

with her; Sister Mary Fabian, stepping back to look at her painting of part of the school grounds, misjudged the distance and immersed herself in the largest of the three ponds; Sister Marcellus shopped and cooked and grumbled as usual. She had no relatives nearer than America, where two of her nephews were FBI men, so she did not take any home holidays and told Sister St. Elmo that, in spite of various dispensations that holiday nuns could claim, she preferred to remain in her own convent rather than spend her annual leave in any other house of the Order.

On one occasion she said that her name in religion ought to be Amata, as it was the nearest she would get to being one, she supposed, a remark in which Sister Romuald, to whom she made it, could see no sense at all until, in the middle of the night, it suddenly dawned on her what the ex-lay sister had meant, and she startled herself by laughing.

The school vacation ended at last and the new term began to get into its stride. The first indication Sister Hilary received that there was more trouble brewing came in the person of Mrs. Fennell, the teacher who took "remedials." This meant that she gave special coaching in small groups to children who needed extra help in such matters as reading, simple mathematics, speech defects, Latin, and French. She described herself as Jack of all trades, master of none, but this opinion was completely erroneous, as she was a fine musician, a skilled embroidress, and possessed considerable talent in painting.

Mrs. Fennell had a quiet, charming voice, the eyes (said old Sister Ignatius) of a saint, and a sensitive, beautiful mouth. Children always responded well to her, the rest of the staff liked and trusted her, and Sister Hilary who, because of her long and varied teaching experience, was seldom deceived by people, relied on her to make her own timetable and do her work in any way that suited herself and fitted in with the plans of the rest of the staff. She had

also made Mrs. Fennell deputy head of the school, though not a shareholder in its profits.

There was no financial reason why Mrs. Fennell needed to work at all. She lived with her architect husband in a large house on the suburban outskirts of the town and came to school to avoid the otherwise unavoidable coffee parties of her neighbours and friends and their endless gossip and small talk. She was the form-mistress of the “special advantage” group, commonly known as “the backwards,” and fitted in her remedial work when these went off to art, cookery, simple woodwork, gymnastics, dancing, music, and games.

It was in one of these periods that, urged to it by Miss Webb, she returned her “remedials” to their own forms and went to knock on Sister Hilary’s door. The headmistress was correcting some Sixth Form English papers based on the previous term’s “A” Levels, but she rang the little bell that invited callers to come in and smiled graciously when she saw who the caller was.

“Why, good morning, Mrs. Fennell,” she said.
“Something I can do for you?”

“Well, if you’re busy, Sister, perhaps some other time?”

“No, no. Sit down and tell me all about it. Unless this lot”—she smacked her hand down on the papers she had already corrected—“buckle down to their set books, we’re not going to get any English “A” Levels next summer. And the *spelling*! I think you’ll have to have a go at them. But what did you come to say?”

“You remember, at the staff tea party last term, you mentioned to Sister Mary Wolstan and the prioress some nuisance-letters that had been sent to the school?”

“And sent to the convent, too. Those to the school, as you probably know, referred to the accident to a village child in which our car was involved; those to the convent related to the old lady who left one of our guest rooms to go and live with her relatives.”

"I think you intended the rest of us to overhear what you were saying."

"Yes, certainly I did. What is more, no other letters of the same sort have been sent either to the prioress or myself. I was fairly certain in my own mind who the writer was, and I guessed that my mention of the police would have some effect."

"And you were right, so far as the school and the convent were concerned, but . . ."

"Yes? You don't mean that similar letters have been sent to *you*?"

"Not only to me. It seems that other members of the staff have had them. The letters were sent to our home addresses, so, in most cases, were not read until people came back from their holiday places. What is more, they are still being sent. Naturally I have shown mine to my husband, and now he has had one, too, and wants to go to the police. His letter is about me and is scurrilous in the extreme, but I did not know that anybody else had received one until Miss Webb showed me hers. That made me wonder, in view of what you had said at the tea party, whether anyone else was being victimised, so I brought the matter up in the common-room while the Sisters were at lunch over at the convent. It turns out that we three women have all had letters accusing us of the most fantastic and ridiculous things."

"Well, that clears up one little mystery," said Sister Hilary. "During the holiday somebody broke into school, rifled my desk and filing cabinet, and turned Sister Wolstan's little office upside down. The only thing taken away, as far as we could discover, was Sister's list of the private addresses of the secular staff. It looks as though I may have been wrong in my deductions. The letters sent to the prioress and myself may have come from outside, after all, and my mention of calling in the police therefore made no impression on anybody who was at the tea party

because all were innocent. I must admit that we suspected old Miss Lipscombe."

"Would she foul her own nest, so to speak?"

"I thought of her first, I suppose, because, of course, she misses the incessant warfare that used to go on between her and Mrs. Wilks, and is pining for a little excitement, poor old thing," explained Sister Hilary. "I believe, you know, that we have to accuse her to her face, disagreeable though such a confrontation will be. However, do you think you could ask your husband to hold his hand about calling in the police, at any rate for the present?"

"Certainly I will. Neither he nor I would want to proceed against anybody in the convent if it can possibly be avoided."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fennell. I know that you have our best interests at heart. Before I actually confront Miss Lipscombe, I will give her one more chance to redeem herself. I have a little plan based on the one the prioress and I used at the end-of-term tea party, but worded a little more specifically."

The headmistress wasted no time. She went straight over to the convent to see the prioress and propound her "little plan." This was that the two old ladies should be informed that "poison-pen" letters were still being disseminated, that these were being collected ready to be handed to the police, and that the prioress would be grateful for the cooperation of Mrs. Polkinghorne and Miss Lipscombe. It was hoped that they would be prepared to hand over any objectionable correspondence they themselves might receive, so that it could be added to the rest of the pile for police inspection, as it was now essential that the police be brought in.

"And if that doesn't work," said the headmistress to Sister Mary Wolstan, when her suggestion with regard to the two old ladies had been carried out, "there is no doubt that it will have to be the police. We can't have mud slung at the school. It is not only the secular staff. It may get to the

parents if we let it go on, and then where shall we be? The 'poison-pen,' whoever it is, may have written to some of them already, or, what would be worse, plan to send some of this anonymous stuff to the girls. There is no telling how much this sort of thing may escalate unless we do something to stop it here and now."

Miss Lipscombe and Mrs. Polkinghorne produced two anonymous letters apiece during the following fortnight and (in the opinion of the prioress), what was far more worrying, all the nuns were now receiving offensive communications. A feature of the letters that differentiated them from those sent at first was that that they were no longer hand-printed, but, like the note that had dropped out of Sister Hilary's programme, were made up from words and phrases cut from printed matter of some sort and pasted on to lined paper.

"It makes me wonder whether another lunatic hasn't taken a leaf out of Miss Liposome's book," said Sister Mary Hilary to the prioress.

"Oh, dear! Surely we are not justified in going on naming names, are we?"

"In public, no, I agree that we are not, but between ourselves I think we are. The difficulty is to know what to do about it."

"I suppose we might—I might—speak to her quietly, suggest that we are sure she wrote the first set of letters and ask whether she can give us any idea as to the identity of the sender of this latest batch."

"But what happens if she denies that she wrote the first batch?"

"Perhaps Father MacNicol will speak to her. She would hardly tell lies to *him*."

"She may have mentioned the letters to him already."

"In Confession, you mean? Yes, I suppose that is possible. It would tie his hands, in that case. It would be utterly impossible for him to mention anything he had heard

that way, even if somebody had confessed to murder. Besides, we can't really be sure about Miss Lipscombe. The letters may come from the village, as we thought at first."

"Well, wherever the first batch of letters came from, those we are receiving now can hardly come from the village."

"How can you be so sure?"

"If the letters and phrases were cut out of newspapers I could not be sure, of course, but it is not newspapers that are being cut up, but printed books."

"No doubt the villagers, or some of them, possess books."

"Well, yes, I suppose so. All the same, Sister, I have a very good mind to examine all the school printed stock. When the list of the staff's private addresses was stolen by that intruder, it would have been easy enough for the thief to have removed a book or two at the same time."

"I thought the children provided their own books."

"They do, of course, but they only take home those that are required for homework or holiday reading. But it is not those classroom books I mean. I am thinking of the school library. An intruder could have slipped in there and purloined books with the greatest of ease."

"They would have been missed by now, wouldn't they?"

"Not necessarily. They might be assumed to be on loan. I have thought for some time that we ought to have a better system. The girls are supposed to sign for any book that is actually removed from the library itself, but, knowing as much about children as I do, I would not like to commit myself to declaring that *every* book that leaves those shelves is signed for by the person who takes it out."

"Well, perhaps you can check on that, although I don't think it's going to help us, even if we can find the mutilated book or books—they will have been returned to the shelves by now."

"It will be a beginning, anyway." There was a pause, then the headmistress said, "And, of course, we have a library here in the convent."

"Here?" The prioress looked astonished. "Yes, I know we have, but . . ."

"Seculars have no access to the convent library, so I do think that, if only in fairness to Miss Lipscombe, an investigation of our own books is called for, as well as those belonging to the school. Don't you think so?"

"Since you put it like that, yes, perhaps I do think so. Sister Leo is the convent librarian. I will speak to her."

"We all have books on the shelves in our rooms, too."

"How do you mean, Sister?"

"Only that I think *all* books should be closely inspected."

"You realise, do you not," said the prioress, after a pregnant pause, "that, even if we find a mutilated book, it will not lead us to the mutilator?—I thought you agreed about that."

"I still think it would be helpful, Sister, if we could find out exactly which book or books are in question. A clue to ownership *might* be a clue to the culprit. It would be much better if we could uncover her identity, rather than leave it to the police."

"Well, if you will have the school library inspected, I will do the same for our library here, but I think we must go into conference before we inspect people's private bookshelves, you know."

"Surely everybody will lend support to any plan that will help us? We have no need to carry out such an inspection ourselves."

"Look, Sister," said the prioress, "it does not matter who searches the two libraries, but do you not realise that nobody can be allowed to inspect her own books for the purpose of discovering whether any of them have been chopped about?"

“Oh, really! But that means you do think it possible one of ourselves may be the culprit!”

“The religious have been known to go mad before now, Sister—a fact that may have to be faced if we are to be honest with ourselves,” said the prioress, concluding the interview. “I shall call a general meeting.”

CHAPTER 9

Conclave and After

“The serpent he did not question, knowing him to be the prime mover in the transgression; but he first pronounced a curse on the serpent . . .”

Irenaeus of Lyons

Sister St. Elmo, with a certain sense of theatre, as it were, had elected to hold her conference in the refectory. Meetings that the whole Community was called upon to attend were usually concerned strictly with convent matters or with advice, fiats, or liturgical changes that affected the whole Order. This particular meeting, Sister St. Elmo had decided, fell into a different and, fortunately for the Community's peace of mind, an unusual category.

The nuns, therefore, instead of sitting more or less comfortably round the big Community Room, were established at the long refectory table and seated on the upright refectory chairs. At the head of the table sat Sister St. Elmo, as prioress and also as chairman of the meeting. Her back was to the only valuable picture the convent possessed, a study of the Feast at Cana painted (reputedly) by Giacomo Palma the Elder. Facing her, at the other end of the table, was Sister Mary Fabian, who had chosen her place deliberately, partly so that she could look at the picture and partly so that she could look at the rest of the Community, which she did with an appreciative artist's eye.

At the right of the prioress sat Sister Ignatius, one-time head of the Order, very small, very frail, and very old, with a wrinkled-apple, little, yellowish face, a totally deaf right ear, and the bright quick eyes of a robin. Next to her was Sister Mary Elphege, waspish, shrewd, alert; a sardonic, thin-lipped, elderly Frenchwoman with nothing beautiful about her except her large, extremely fine hands.

There was never much competition to sit next to her, for she was given, in meetings, to making sarcastic, pointed “asides” in comment upon what was being said, and as these comments, though often justified, were seldom witty, nobody particularly wanted to be their recipient. So, by dextrous manipulation, the chair on her right had been left to the ingenuous, moon-faced Sister Mary Raymund, the latest-joined member of the Community, who, coming last in the procession to the refectory meeting, had perforce to take the only vacant seat.

To make up for this (in Sister Raymund’s opinion) Sister Mary Romuald had taken the next chair, to be flanked by Sister Mary Leo, nervous, intense, extraordinarily devout, and looking like a particularly well-scrubbed Truman Holmes, Jr, a picture that Sister Mary Fabian (herself the daughter of a painter) had once seen in a folk-art collection in Virginia.

On the left of the prioress sat the headmistress, next to her came Sister Wolstan, then Sister Honorius (whose name, Sister Elphege had suggested, should have been Sister Francis, since she seemed to have *cette affinite avec animaux vivants*), and then came the flat-faced, suspicious-eyed Marcellus, full of her wrongs as usual.

“A meeting!” she said, as she took her place resentfully at the table. “Everything to do in the kitchen before one can think of one’s bed, and my turn on the rota to do the washing-up for all of you; yes, and to be up first in the morning to make sure you are all roused in good time for your duties, which are all much pleasanter than mine And now this meeting!”

So, at the foot of the table, sat the lively, easy-going Sister Mary Fabian, thinking wistfully of what a picture the nuns would make if only she could be allowed to paint it. Her grey eyes clouded over for a moment. She, like Sister Mary Hilary, was a late-comer to the religious life. Before she entered, somebody—a man—had once told her that, with her straight-cut fringe of pale gold hair (which she was allowed to show again), her wide-set eyes, and her air of self-possession, she could have been the model for a famous picture by a French impressionist. Even at that time she had demurred. “If you knew anything about art at all,” she had retorted, “you would see that what I could have been is the model for an archaic marble *kore*. If you are ever in Athens, go to the Acropolis museum and look at the Phaedimus statue called *Peplophoros*.”

The prioress waited until everyone was seated and Sister Marcellus had ceased to mutter, then began the speech she had prepared. She had asked for no advice and had taken nobody, not even Sister Hilary, completely into her confidence. She knew what she wanted to say and she intended to say it. The only person to whom it might come as a complete surprise, she conjectured, was old Sister Mary Ignatius; but in this she was mistaken. Sister Ignatius had only one operational and functional ear, but that was wide open. She had been present at the end-of-term tea party and had been sufficiently intrigued to enquire later of Mrs. Polkinghorne, whose Latin mentality was nearest to her own, the purpose of Sister Mary Hilary’s references to the police.

“I have called this meeting,” began Sister St. Elmo, “to ask you all to do something to help us. I’ll begin by asking a question. Is there anyone here who has not received an offensive, unsigned letter?”

"I have received no letters at all for a long time now," said old Sister Ignatius.

"My letters all come from America," said Marcellus.

"I see," the prioress went on. "It is as I thought. Well, the first letters of the kind to which I refer were handwritten, you may remember, in rough capitals and were directed to Sister Mary Hilary and myself, but later (and much more objectionable) ones are formed from words and phrases cut out of printed matter and pasted on to sheets of lined paper. The inference is that the material is provided from books, and I am hoping that those books are not the property of the Community."

There was a shocked silence. Then, "What about the school?" asked Sister Fabian from her seat at the end of the table. "Judging by the two letters sent to me and which I have shown you, I should imagine that a nasty-minded child could have concocted them."

Sister Mary Hilary raised her boldly marked eyebrows and looked at the prioress, who said, "The school library is being closely inspected, of course. My immediate concern is to make certain that none of our own books has been defaced."

"We should hardly deface those," said Sister Mary Leo. "That is, if you suppose . . ."

"Of course not. But the front and side doors here are always open until sunset at this time of year and our own rooms are left unlocked."

"If I may speak . . ." said Sister Hilary.

"I cannot see how it will help us if we *do* find that some of our books have been defaced," said Sister Elphege, interrupting her. "It will bring us no nearer to discovering who the culprit is, and it is insufferable that we should be put into such a position. To suspect one another of these abominations is intolerable! If base decisions and accusations are to be made—"

"Oh, come now," said Sister Honorius, "nobody has said anything like that. Surely it is only reasonable that we should submit our own books for inspection before we begin to go more deeply into the matter. It's like clearing the decks for action, that is all."

"Reasonable!" cried Sister Elphege. "It is not reasonable! It is degrading and insulting. Besides, who is to carry out this inspection? If it is to be done at all, it should be done by someone from outside, someone who does not know us, someone . . ."

"Which brings me to what I was about to suggest," said Sister Hilary, interrupting her previous interrupter. "Before I received the Faith and long before I entered religion, I was in college with a student named Laura Menzies. I was in a hostel for the older students, but we became acquainted because I used to referee the hockey practices when the first played the second eleven. We still keep up a somewhat desultory correspondence, although she never took up teaching, but became secretary to the famous psychiatrist Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley. She also married and is now Mrs. I. R. D. Gavin, wife of Assistant Commissioner Ian Robert David Gavin, who is head of the Crime Squad, as I believe it is called, at New Scotland Yard."

"Surely Scotland Yard would not be interested in *our* little troubles, would it?" asked the prioress, who felt the meeting slipping out of her hands into those of the headmistress.

"No, of course not, Mother," replied Sister Hilary, invoking the obsolete title to nullify her tone of impatient rebuke, "but I thought that if I could persuade Mrs. Gavin to interest Dame Beatrice in those "little" troubles, she might prove more able than ourselves, or even the local police, in finding and naming the author of these abominable letters."

"But we know who is the author of them, don't we?" said old Sister Ignatius. "She goes out every Saturday when Sister Prioress is at church doing the flowers; and you and

Sister Wolstan are in the school dealing with school matters; and Sister Mary Raymund or Sister Romuald is driving the car; and Sister Marcellus is doing the shopping, and the others are marking school books or preparing the next week's lessons, or whatever it is. Then she buys the stamps. I have seen the look on her face when she comes back with them, and her face wears no pleasant expression, if you'll please to believe me."

"You don't *know* she buys stamps, though, do you, Sister?" asked Sister Mary Romuald in gentle tones. Old Sister Ignatius looked at her out of brilliant, intelligent, Florentine eyes and did not reply except to say, "Psychiatrist: that is the answer."

"Well, well!" said Laura Gavin, who, in the breakfast-room of the Stone House on the edge of the New Forest near the village of Wandles Parva, was sorting out the morning's correspondence as usual, and had come across a letter addressed to herself. "Surely I know this uncompromising, bold, determined, swashbuckling handwriting, don't I? The last time I saw it was on an envelope containing a Christmas card. Wonder what Sister Mary Hilary, OCP, wants with me at what must be the beginning of the autumn term? Not to help as a stand-in for absentee staff, I trust!"

"What do the letters OCP stand for?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"She belongs nowadays to a Roman Catholic religious community called the Order of the Companions of the Poor," explained Laura. "I've never bothered you with her before, because I've never canvassed your views on my being acquainted with nuns. Anyway, she wasn't always a nun. Remember the old days at Cartaret College? Well, this Mary Hilary, as she now calls herself, used to be an inhabitant of Rule Britannia's, otherwise known as Columba Hall, the hostel, if you recollect, where they parked all the old hags of

twenty-five years and over. In those days she was known as Cecilia Brownrigg and used to ref. the practice games on the first eleven hockey pitch. She was, in that and in all ways, a man and a brother until she saw the light and took the veil."

"I had experience of a convent once," said Dame Beatrice. "It was some years before you and I became acquainted. I was called in to investigate the death of a pupil at a convent school in Devon."

"So you know all about convents."

"That is not a claim I should have the effrontery to make."

"Well, let's hope Sister Mary Hilary doesn't want us to investigate the death of one of her kids," said Laura, slitting open the letter. "No, not a death," she said, when she had read it, "merely a matter of anonymous letters. She wants me to use my powers of persuasion, if any, to induce you to go along and look into the thing." She handed the letter to her employer and added, "it can't be this week, anyway. You're all booked up."

"Oh, dear!" said Dame Beatrice, when she had read what Sister Mary Hilary had to say. "It seems that the letters are not really anonymous, after all. The nuns are convinced that they can name the writer, but have no proof and cannot bring themselves to make an open accusation without concrete evidence. I sympathise with their point of view, but I think they are being unnecessarily squeamish in considering the feelings of this mischievous person, this Miss Lipscombe."

"But suppose they are wrong?"

"From what I know of nuns, that is very unlikely."

"So they suspect this elderly, unmarried convent boarder. But if they can't find any proof, will you be any luckier?—not that I doubt your powers, but if there were any proof, wouldn't they have found it by now, since they're so sure of this poison-pen's identity?"

"What kind of woman is Sister Mary Hilary?"

“Well, of course, it’s donkey’s years since I actually met her, and we don’t correspond very often, but, as I remember her, she was a vigorous, downright, you-can’t-do-that-’ere sort of person, who would send you off the field as soon as look at you if she thought there was mayhem being committed. Not that she ever needed to send anybody off in the ladylike scuffles that used to go on between the first and second elevens at Cartaret, of course.”

“The trouble about anonymous letters is not only that they are offensive, abusive, and frequently blasphemous, but usually they rest upon a foundation of fact, however insecure that foundation may be,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Sister Hilary states that members of the Community have received these letters, so it would seem as though the writer has intimate knowledge of the convent and its ways. The most likely persons to be so well informed are the inmates themselves, of course, so no wonder they have fastened upon a scapegoat.”

“Good heavens! You’re not suggesting . . .”

“One never knows. The convent, however, houses other inmates besides the nuns. Further to that, if suspicion had been fastened upon one of the Community, it would have been an internal matter to get that suspicion confirmed. They would not be calling in an outsider to solve their problem. A convent, I imagine, is like a school or a college. You don’t wash the dirty linen in public except as the very last resource of all.”

“So you think they’re right to suspect Miss Lipscombe?”

“She seems to fulfil most of the classic conditions.”

“What sort of anonymous letters would be sent to nuns, I wonder?”

“Speculation is idle. What interests me more is what triggered off the letters at all.”

“No smoke without fire, you mean.”

“Your letter states that earlier letters came only to Sister Mary Hilary herself and to the prioress, but she does

not say why.”

“And now the nuns and the school secular staff have had them, too. Sounds like somebody who’s got a grudge against both school and convent and is determined to pile on the agony. Well, what are we going to do about it?”

“I see the school is on the telephone. I suggest you go through the list of our commitments and then tell Sister Mary Hilary that I will come to the convent at the first possible opportunity. Meanwhile I would like her to collect any letters that have not been destroyed, and show them to me when I arrive.”

Laura hastened to carry out these instructions and was heartened by an enthusiastic response from Sister Hilary.

“I’m so grateful,” she said. “So far, of course, the letters have had nothing but nuisance value, very unpleasant though they are. My fear is that the next people involved may be the schoolgirls and that would be dreadful. I quite understand that Dame Beatrice is a very busy person, but how soon do you think she could come?”

Laura had looked up the list of Dame Beatrice’s immediate engagements, although she knew it off by heart, and was able to suggest Wednesday of the following week.

PART TWO

STYX

CHAPTER 10

The Styx Is a Pond

“Or is it weed, or fish, or floating hair?”

Charles Kingsley

“My thumbs are pricking,” said Laura to Dame Beatrice on the following Tuesday morning.

“Dear me! I have learned to fear these manifestations of occult power.”

“Don’t joke about it. My maternal grandmother had the Gift.”

“Was she the seventh child of a seventh child?”

“No. She was the ninth child in a family of nine.”

“Did *her* thumbs prick?”

“I’ve no idea, but her grandmother foresaw the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879.”

“And what disaster do you foresee?”

“If I knew that, I might know what to do about it. I suppose it’s no good asking you not to go to this convent tomorrow?”

“I feel that I am committed.”

“Am I to go with you? I told Sister Hilary I didn’t think so.”

“No, I would rather you stayed here and manned our operational base, as it were. I will have George drive me to the convent.”

“How long do you expect to be away? There’s that BBC series coming up, you know.”

“Not for another month. I have it in mind. I do not anticipate a lengthy stay at the convent.”

“Fair enough. After the BBC set-up there’s the Bodley thing in Oxford. You don’t want to go wearing yourself out chasing some obscure poison-pen when you ought to be conserving your strength for more important matters.”

“I have always been interested in the psychology of the writers of anonymous letters. I cannot feel that the subject has ever been explored sufficiently.”

“I thought it was all old hat. You know, thwarted spinsters and gaga old maids and so forth.”

“Then why don’t all thwarted women write such letters?”

“Can’t afford the postage stamps, perhaps.”

“Yes, and that brings us to the nub of this convent matter. If—as the letter from Sister Mary Hilary suggests—the writer is one of their elderly paying guests, how are the letters delivered? Do they all come by post, or are some of them pushed under doors?”

“You think that by examining the postage stamp angle you can come to some conclusion about the writer? Of course, postage stamps do come expensive these days and old ladies who live in convent guesthouses may not be blessed with overmuch spare cash.”

“That does not follow. Nervous old ladies of substance may well think that a convent is the safest harbour in these troubled and rapacious times.”

She set off, driven by her chauffeur, immediately after breakfast on the following morning and so missed a telephone message that came through at half-past ten. Laura took it, wrote it down, and whistled as she did so, realising there was nothing she could do about it. She did not know where Dame Beatrice would decide to stop for lunch so could not contact her before she arrived at her

destination. In any case, thought Laura, it did not matter very much. The telephone message had begged Dame Beatrice only to postpone her visit, not to put it off entirely, and when Laura, answering the caller, who turned out to be Sister Mary Hilary herself, said that Dame Beatrice was already on her way, there had been expressions of relief at the other end of the line.

It was a longish drive from the Stone House in Hampshire to the convent, but there were no delays on the road except for the lunch-stop in Tewkesbury, and the car drew up at the gates of the convent car-park at just before half-past three. The gates were closed and a policeman was on duty. He opened the gates sufficiently to allow himself through and came up to the car to speak to Dame Beatrice.

“Are you a parent, madam?”

“No. I have come up from Hampshire on official business with Sister Mary Hilary.” She produced a visiting card. “She is expecting me.”

The constable glanced at the card and his face cleared.

“Oh, yes, madam, that’s in order,” he said. “If you wouldn’t mind parking clear of the inspector’s car, madam. He is over at the school at the moment.” He opened the double gates to let the car through, closed, and locked them again and resumed his vigil. George drove up to the front door of the convent, opened the car door to allow Dame Beatrice to alight, and then parked at a respectful distance from the police car which was also near the front door.

At the entrance to the convent stood another policeman. Apparently he had received a signal from the man on duty at the gates, for he saluted Dame Beatrice and moved aside for her to enter. In the hall was the fluttering, excited figure of Sister Marcellus, apparently stationed on watch.

“Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley?” she said. “Oh, yes, please to come with me. The prioress is expecting you. Oh,

dear! Oh, dear! Such times we live in, to be sure! Poor Miss Lipscombe! But it was only to be expected."

"What was?"

"She's dead, you know. That is why the police are here. A dreadful thing. I have never known anything like it. But there! If it isn't one thing it's another. I will take you straight to Mother St. Elmo. We have to call her Sister nowadays. She is in her office and the inspector is over at the school questioning everybody. As though we or the poor children can tell him why she did it and so died in mortal sin!"

A moment later Dame Beatrice met Sister Mary St. Elmo. She was warmly greeted and found her yellow claw grasped in a firm, plump, brown hand, as the prioress led her from the bare little business-like office along another part of the cloister to the convent parlour.

"There!" she said, more or less pushing Dame Beatrice on to a very comfortable settee. "What a terrible journey for you! You must have some tea! Sister, some tea for Dame Beatrice."

Sister Marcellus, who had followed them along the echoing cloister and had been hovering in the parlour doorway, now manifested herself. She was actuated largely by curiosity, but also, reasonably enough, she regarded herself as indispensable when visitors arrived and had to be hospitably entertained.

"Tea?" she said. "Yes, of course, Mother."

"That is not my title," said the prioress, when Marcellus had gone off to the kitchen. "I am Sister Mary St. Elmo, prioress. Sister Mary Hilary telephoned you this morning, but your secretary said that you had already left home. We are so glad to see you. Sister was so much relieved when she knew that it was too late to put off your visit. We are in terrible trouble."

"The Sister who brought me to you mentioned a fatality."

"Yes, indeed. Miss Lipscombe, one of our paying guests, was found drowned in the school pond this morning."

"Dear me! That must have been very disconcerting for you all. Was it an accident?"

"Well," said Sister St. Elmo, "as it had to happen, that is what we are hoping, but there are factors which make us wonder. Of course we had to send for the police. The doctor told us that we must do so. Their manner, since they have been here—over six hours now—has been most reserved and, I would say, suspicious. Every one of us has been closely questioned, rooms have been searched, the pond in which the poor soul was found has been cordoned off, and now, I understand, the schoolchildren are to be interrogated. The police could hardly be more thorough, or more alarming, if Miss Lipscombe had been murdered."

"They have to make a study in depth of these things," said Dame Beatrice, to whom this account of the proceedings had indicated that the police felt that they had every reason to be reserved and suspicious.

"Fortunately, in England they are also very polite," said Sister St. Elmo, as one who is determined to give the devil his due. "We have no complaints on *that* score. Of course, when Sister Mary Hilary was told what had happened to poor dear Miss Lipscombe, she would have liked to send all the children home straightway this morning, but she consulted with Sister Mary Wolstan, who is the school secretary, and they decided that, as the majority of the pupils are taken home by car, the task of telephoning upwards of a hundred and fifty parents, many of whom would inevitably have been out shopping or at coffee-parties or something of the sort, was too daunting to be contemplated. A good thing it was, in a way, because the police inspector was adamant that nobody was to leave, either from the school or from this house, until he gave permission. It seems very arbitrary to me, but I suppose the police know their own business and what the rules are."

“Undoubtedly. Besides, for your own sakes it is as well to get matters cleared up and the police off the premises as soon as possible.”

At this point Sister Marcellus brought in tea. The prioress introduced her as soon as she had set down the loaded tray and then intimated that they would leave Dame Beatrice in peace to enjoy her tea. She was not left alone for long. She had just poured out her first cup when the door opened and an elderly, dark-eyed woman in a flowered dress augmented by a woollen jacket came in, saw the visitor, said, “Oh, good afternoon. I did not know anybody was here,” seated herself in an armchair and got on with the crotcheting of a long piece of lace which she had brought in with her. After a short pause, during which Dame Beatrice took a sip of tea, the newcomer, without looking up from her occupation, went on: “You come to take Miss Lipscombe’s place, no?”

“No, I am here only for a very short visit, I hope.”

“So? I thought it was too soon for them to have let her room, especially as she had paid to the end of the week.”

“Who is Miss Lipscombe?” asked Dame Beatrice, deciding that it might be interesting to obtain a point of view about the deceased which was not that of the nuns and might very well be complementary to it.

“Miss Lipscombe? You do not know? This morning—last night, maybe—she go with God.” Mrs. Polkinghorne crossed herself devoutly. “Fall in the biggest pond and is drowned.”

“Good gracious! How did that happen?”

“Nobody knows. The police are here. What is your name? How well do you know this dead woman? How long have you lived here? Did she always walk in the grounds by herself? Was she a subject of the dizzy?—the *vahido*, they mean the *vértigo*—you understand?”

“And was she?”

“Oh, no, not at all. She had a good command over her head when she is on high.”

"A good head for heights?"

"Oh, yes, that is it. I have seen her when we have our summer treat. She go to the edge of cliffs, look down—no fears at all."

"So it isn't likely that she became giddy when she was standing by the pond and tumbled in."

"That is what I do not understand. The ponds—there are three, one for the ducks, one for the water-lilies, and this big one which is at the end of the school field—nobody from the convent ever go to the ponds except *las niñas* and Sister Maria 'Onoria who feed the ducks. Never did I know Miss Lipscombe to go near the ponds. Why should she do that? There is nothing to see except a lot of dirty water. We do not go to the school field, we of the convent. We have our own garden, peaceful, beautiful, with walks and seats and an *estatua de Santa Maria en Gruta*. Why should we go to the school field?"

"Well, it seems that Miss Lipscombe *did* go there."

"I think somebody take her."

"Really? What makes you think so?"

"She write too many letters. I tell her. I say to her, 'One day you write one letter too many,' and I think that is what she do."

"To whom did she write these letters?"

Mrs. Polkinghorne made a wide gesture.

"She write them to everybody—*cada uno, cada una, a todo el mundo*," she said spaciouly.

"How do you know?"

"What is there to do here but to find out? *She* find out everybody his business; *I* find out *her* business. Very simple. I ask at the post office, 'Did Miss Lipscombe buy her stamps, or shall I get them for her?' They say, 'Oh, but she has twenty the other day. She need more?' So I say, 'Not so, if she has twenty. I think to save her the journey, that is all.' They say, 'Very kind thought.' Of course it is not kind at all. I know she write these letters. Now I know she post them."

"It must have cost her a good deal of money."

"Oh, that Miss Lipscombe, she was a bad egg. I think she get money from Mrs. Wilks because of something she know about her. She write her a letter, too. This I know because she tell me."

"Mrs. Wilks told you?"

"No. That Miss Lipscombe, she tell me herself. 'I write to her by the post office,' she tell me. So what do you make of that?"

"Did she receive an answer?"

"That," said Mrs. Polkinghorne regretfully, "I do not know. She say so, but I am not sure."

"But you said that she received money from Mrs. Wilks."

"How else can she buy all those stamps?"

Before Dame Beatrice could point out that there were other reasons why Miss Lipscombe might have been in a position to buy stamps, the chief reason being that she might have gone without other things in order to do so, Sister Marcellus came in to clear the tea-table and to inform Dame Beatrice that her room was ready for her if she would care to go along and inspect it.

In the cloister they met the prioress, who took over from Sister Marcellus and conducted Dame Beatrice to the room kept for visiting priests, and which (although Dame Beatrice only suspected this) was much the most comfortably furnished bedchamber in the house.

Her suitcase, she found, had already been deposited in it. She ventured to enquire whether there was any household in the village which would be willing to lodge her chauffeur or whether he should seek accommodation in the town.

"Oh, Tom is looking after him," said Sister St. Elmo.

"Your man has had his tea at Tom's cottage and there is a bed there for him. It is all arranged. Now there is a bell in this room," she indicated it, "which connects with the kitchen. If you will ring it as soon as you are ready, Sister

Marcellus will bring you along to my office, since it is better that we do not talk together in the parlour because Mrs. Polkinghorne has a right to be in there to have her tea and to spend the evening if she so wishes. When the others come over from school, Sister Mary Hilary will join us and we can have our conversation in private. Needless to say, now that we have Miss Lipscombe's death to add to our anxieties we are more eager than ever to have your help and support. There is still the question of the anonymous letters, of course, but I think it is doubtful whether we shall see any more of those."

Among the other amenities provided for visiting priests was a small private bathroom to which, with pride, Sister Marcellus, who had followed the prioress, now directed attention.

"It opens out of the bedroom," she pointed out, "so nobody uses it but you and nobody cleans it but me. You have good soap and soft towels, also a mirror. I hope you will be happy and comfortable. Ring your bell if there is anything I can do for you. I am accustomed to run about this house, now here, now there, at the command of everybody. I am cook, cleaner, portress, all of it. One serves."

"Like the Prince of Wales," said Dame Beatrice. "I shall give as little trouble as possible, Sister, I assure you. I shall not add to the burdens of a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord."

She rang the bell as soon as she had unpacked and washed away the stains, if any, of travel, and after a short interval Sister Marcellus reappeared, gave her a swift up-and-down look as though to make sure that she was presentable, and took her along the cloister to the prioress.

"Sister Mary Hilary has not come over yet," said Sister St. Elmo, giving Dame Beatrice the only comfortable chair in the sparsely furnished office while she herself sat behind her desk, "and the children have not been dismissed, either. I sent across to let her know that you have arrived, so I

know she will come as soon as ever she can. Is there anything I can tell you while we are waiting for her? I have all the letters that have been sent to the Community. I expect you would like to see them, though I'm afraid there is little point now, as I think I indicated."

"You think that Miss Lipscombe wrote the letters?"

"Well, that is something that ought to be cleared up, though I don't think anybody has any doubts." She gave Dame Beatrice an account of the theft of the staff-list and added, "So we cannot imagine why anybody should take such a list unless to be in a position to send these scurrilous letters to the private addresses of our secular teachers."

"In her own letter to Mrs. Gavin, Sister Mary Hilary mentioned that the first two letters followed the departure of one of your elderly guests and that there had been a slight accident with your car that caused a certain amount of injury to one of the villagers."

"A child, yes. The first letters were nothing much. It is these later ones that have caused us so much uneasiness."

"Have you preserved the early letters?"

"No. They were rather hurtful, suggesting as they did, that we were unpopular on account of the accident and, also, because Mrs. Wilks had left us, but they were not offensively couched as far as the language employed was concerned."

"Why did she leave you?"

"A nephew had come into money and offered to give her a home. I must say that he seemed pleasant enough. An Irishman, I think. He contributed lavishly to the Poor Box which we keep in the parlour on top of the piano. Miss Lipscombe thought he was a Jew, but many Irishmen have prominent noses. I will admit, however, that he was wearing expensive-looking, extremely smart, somewhat loud clothes and came in a very large car, which Tom, our factotum, tells me is this year's model. He also left a five-pound note on the table to pay for his lunch. Sister Marcellus found it when

she cleared away after he and Mrs. Wilks had gone. It was quite unnecessary for him to pay, of course."

"Mrs. Wilks, no doubt, was pleased to see one of her relatives. Had he ever visited her before?"

"Nobody had visited her. Indeed, she told me that she had only a niece and had no idea that she was married. This man wrote to Mrs. Wilks about a week before she left us, but she kept her own counsel except that, of course, I knew she had had a letter, since all correspondence comes to me to be distributed. The first I knew of her changed circumstances, however, was when she asked me how much notice I should require, as she was giving up her room."

"I see. And it was after she left the convent that the anonymous letters began. What about Miss Lipscombe at that time?"

"Well, we did not connect them with Miss Lipscombe at first because (of the early letters) one referred to the injured child and the other to Mrs. Wilks. At first we thought both were written by the same person, but when others came we've been inclined to believe that those sent to Sister Mary Hilary were genuine; that is to say, that they came from the parents of the child, but we think that the rest of the letters were written by Miss Lipscombe. Anyway, we shall soon know the truth about Miss Lipscombe."

"If no more letters come?"

"That is what I mean."

"Had she any reason to believe that you suspected her?"

"That is what makes her death so terrible. I think she *did* have reason to believe it. We had talked openly, and in her presence, of calling in the police. Of course, we had not intended to do anything of the sort."

"Why not? People who make such nuisances of themselves certainly ought to be prosecuted. Suppose she had written anonymous filth to some of the schoolgirls? What then?"

"That was what we feared, of course, but it is a dreadful thing to punish people who cannot help what they do. All we intended was to warn her and to hope that she would take the hint and stop writing the letters."

"If she could not help what she was doing, a hint of that kind would hardly be effective, would it?"

"I suppose not, but what has happened is worse, much worse, than the letters."

"You think so? *Chacun à son goût*. You regard her death as suicide, then?"

"What else can it be?"

"Well, if one or more of the letters hit one or more of the recipients hard enough, it could just as easily be murder," said Dame Beatrice, advancing this argument on the strength of her conversation with Mrs. Polkinghorne.

"Well," said Sister St. Elmo, after some troubled thought, "I'm not sure—yes, I am sure. I would be relieved, in a way, if it did turn out to be murder. At least our consciences would be able to tell us that we did not drive the poor creature to her death."

"Yes, I can understand that." As she said this, there came a tap on the door. The prioress rang the little handbell which was on her desk and a nun entered.

"School is dismissed, Sister," she said, "and Sister Hilary asked me to tell you that she will come over as soon as the police inspector has gone. She thinks it will only be a matter of minutes."

"Thank you, Sister. Dame Beatrice, this is Sister Mary Wolstan, the convent bursar and school secretary."

"Well," said Dame Beatrice, "before Sister Mary Hilary gets here and we become involved with the drowning fatality and what the police have to say about it, I wonder whether I might have a kind of timetable to show how an average day here would run?"

"I had thought of that as soon as Sister Mary Hilary told me you were coming," said Sister Wolstan, looking at the

prioress and receiving an encouraging nod. "We have our meals in the refectory. Yours will be served in the parlour, but if, at any time, you wish to be apart from Mrs. Polkinghorne, I will ask Sister Marcellus to serve you in your own room. We breakfast a good deal earlier than you will want to do, so here is the list I have made out. I have added the times when the Community will be in chapel."

"Where, of course, we shall be most pleased to have you join us, should you feel so inclined," said the prioress, "but, naturally, this is Liberty Hall where our guests are concerned."

"I see that you no longer use the old names for the Canonical Hours," Dame Beatrice remarked, as she glanced at the piece of paper which Sister Mary Wolstan handed over.

"More's the pity," said the die-hard conservative, "but everything changes nowadays."

"A rose by any other name," said Dame Beatrice, "will smell as sweet, I trust."

CHAPTER 11

The Secular Arm

“But make a virtue of it by all means. My good qualities are under your protection, and you are to exaggerate them as much as possible.”

Jane Austen

“Well!” said Sister Hilary, arriving a little later. “It is good of you to come. I hope you are not dreadfully tired after your journey, because the police inspector would like a word with you. I thought it best to leave him in my study over at school. Could I take you to him, do you think?”

“The cleaners will want to be busy over there,” said the prioress. “Why not bring him to my office? I’ve finished there for today.”

Sister Marcellus was summoned to fetch the inspector and departed grumbling, as usual, and returned with a lantern-jawed, grizzled man in plain clothes, who carried a briefcase in one hand and a bowler hat in the other. He gave the impression less of a police officer than of an undertaker in a respectable but provincial line of business. Introductions were provided and then, led by Sister Marcellus, he and Dame Beatrice went along the cloister to the office, where Marcellus reluctantly left them in order to attend to her usual duties.

Dame Beatrice took a chair and the inspector, whose name was Cramond, seated himself behind the desk.

“Well, ma’am,” he said, “you didn’t expect to run into this sort of business when you left your home this morning.”

“No, indeed, Inspector.”

“Just a private visit, would it be?”

“Not quite. The nuns and others have been receiving some rather disagreeable letters, I understand—anonymous, of course—and as my secretary used to know the headmistress, Sister Mary Hilary, when they were in college together, the nuns asked me to come along.”

“To find out who writes them, I suppose. We know you by reputation, of course, ma’am. You were coming as a psychiatrist, I take it, and not, so to say, as a criminologist.”

“The nuns had a pretty fair idea that they knew the identity of the letter-writer and wanted their suspicions confirmed, so that they could confront the person concerned and indicate to him or her that it would be unwise to continue with the petty persecution.”

“And I don’t think they were far wrong in their assumptions, ma’am. Just as a bit of routine, while I was over at the school and everybody was out of the way, I got my chaps to drag that big pond. I had no notion of what they might find, beyond old tin cans and suchlike, but what they dragged out was one of those big, heavy Bibles where people used to write all the family births, marriages, and deaths. It had a big brass clasp, so the water hadn’t done it as much damage as you might think, and it was possible to make out that it had belonged to the Lipscombe family. What’s more, a lot of the pages weren’t only wet; they had been defaced by having bits here and there carefully cut out of them. So what do you make of that, ma’am?”

“Well, not positive proof, but a very strong assumption, Inspector . . . that she did write the letters, so her death could have been suicide—or murder. Whereabouts in the pond did your men find the volume?”

“Near enough the middle, ma’am, in about four feet of water.”

"Could she have thrown it as far as that?"

"No, ma'am. My guess is that she waded in, got rid of it, and then got near enough to the bank before she changed her mind and decided to end it all, or else, of course, she met somebody younger and stronger than herself at the edge of the pond, got him or her to chuck the big book into the middle . . ."

"And then, all unsuspecting, was set upon? Is that a possibility, do you think?"

"It's a possibility, ma'am, and one that can't be ruled out, although, at the moment, suicide seems just as likely. Old ladies who've been respectable and poor all their lives don't like the idea of being mixed up with the police. When, as I understand, the convent mentioned something of the sort, she may have panicked. What I think makes suicide a better bet than murder is the Bible. Nobody but herself would want to get rid of the evidence that she'd cut rude and unkind words out of it, would they?"

"Oh, I agree with you that Miss Lipscombe wanted the evidence suppressed, but also I'm sure she got somebody stronger than herself to throw the Bible into the middle of the pond. Whether that was done on the day of her death or previous to it, of course we cannot, at this stage, be sure."

"You have a point there, ma'am. It could have been done earlier and need have nothing to do with her death at all, but only with those anonymous letters."

"Have you seen any of the letters?"

"Only those sent to the nuns. The lady teachers had one or two, but they chucked them away. I don't blame them for that."

"But the nuns did not throw theirs away?"

"No, ma'am. They all showed theirs to the prioress and she, sensible body, kept 'em. Says she felt sure she'd have to bring us in if what she calls 'this persecution' continued, and so she stuck to the evidence—most of it, anyway. Says she *did* advise the headmistress to chuck away the early

ones, but when letters came for the other nuns she kept them and I've seen the lot."

"There will be an inquest on the body, of course."

"Have to be, ma'am, but the medical evidence seems clear. She was drowned. No other injuries. I expect a verdict of suicide while balance of mind was upset. Stands to reason an anonymous letter writer must be three parts mental—or so the coroner's jury will argue."

"Yes, but usually it is a victim of the letters, not the perpetrator, who finds refuge in suicide."

"Fair enough, ma'am, but she may have decided to end everything when she knew she'd been rumbled," said the inspector, repeating a previous observation.

"She had not actually been accused, though, had she?"

"Seems they thought they'd said enough to warn her off, ma'am."

"But she doesn't seem to have taken the warning. If she had, there would have been no need for Sister Mary Hilary to contact me."

"That Bible interests me, ma'am. Could be that somebody knew she'd been cutting out rude words from it and told her off. If so, that could have tipped the scale. These old ladies that write poison-pen stuff are such a peculiar mixture. They indulge themselves writing spiteful letters calling people names you wouldn't think they knew; yet on the surface they're the most proper and puritanical old birds alive, and can't bear being made to realise what wicked old parties they really are. The priest may have had a word with her, you know."

"I have been told that she herself said she had received two anonymous letters. These people usually write at least one to themselves, just to allay suspicion, and if she was the author she would certainly have let it be thought that she was one of the victims, wouldn't she? And, if you are right, she'd have told the priest about it."

"On the other hand, isn't it possible," said the inspector doubtfully, "that she may have been a genuine victim? May have received a nasty letter and didn't like to show it to anybody, but just did herself in because she couldn't face up to the truth or libel it contained."

"It is possible, certainly."

"Oh, well, there's nothing more I can do here, ma'am, but there is one little matter which ought to be cleared up in connection with the letters. Seems there was a lot of feeling about an accident to a child that was knocked down by a car driven by one of the nuns. Couldn't have any bearing on Miss Lipscombe's death, of course, as she wasn't in any way involved, but as there's an idea here that the parents, or somebody else in the village, may have sent the first anonymous letters, I'll have to see into it. Mustn't leave stones unturned."

Before the inspector could say more, there was a tap at the door and Sister Marcellus came in. Although she was armed with an excuse, the interruption was made, Dame Beatrice guessed, purely for reasons of curiosity.

"Sister would like to know when you would like your supper, Dame Beatrice."

"At any time that is convenient to her, thank you, Sister," Dame Beatrice replied. "Perhaps you would be good enough to conduct me to her. The inspector is just leaving, I believe."

The inspector accompanied both ladies to the parlour where, in a few moments, Sister St. Elmo joined them. The inspector, thanking the prioress for her help, was escorted to the front door by Marcellus.

When he had gone, Dame Beatrice said, "We were talking about the letters. I suppose Miss Lipscombe received one?"

"Two, or so she said; and so did Mrs. Polkinghorne."

"Did they show them to you?"

“Not to read. The only ones I have read are those sent to the Community.”

“I wonder whether I might see the letters?”

“The inspector has impounded all those I was able to show him. He thought the coroner might want to see them. Unfortunately we had only those we ourselves received. The secular members of the school staff, as I expect you know, seem to have destroyed their letters. I believe they were far worse than any that were sent here to us, so I suppose they did not care to show them.”

Before the prioress could say more, Sister Hilary joined them. Dame Beatrice turned to her and asked, in uncompromising, point-blank fashion,

“You have never suspected any member of your staff, I suppose, of perpetrating the letters?”

Sister Mary Hilary looked surprised; then she laughed. “Perhaps you would like to meet my staff tomorrow,” she said, “and see what you make of them.”

Breakfast on the following morning was served to Dame Beatrice and Mrs. Polkinghorne in the convent parlour at half-past eight. At just after nine, when all the nuns were in school except the three who always remained in the house (unless two of them were otherwise engaged—Sister Marcellus to go shopping and the prioress on official visits connected either with the Order itself or with work in the parish), Dame Beatrice went outside for a breath of air and to examine the pond in which Miss Lipscombe had been found drowned.

Her car was drawn up where George had left it, at a short distance from the front door. The bonnet was open and bending over it were her chauffeur and a middle-aged, tallish man in overalls. She went up to them.

“Anything wrong with the engine, George?” she asked. The men straightened up. George, who was wearing his peaked cap, saluted; his companion touched his brow.

"Not a thing, madam," George replied. "My friend Mr. Quince was interested to have a look at her, that's all."

"So this is Mr. Quince," said Dame Beatrice, "who is so kindly giving you hospitality."

"Glad of the chance, ma'am," said Tom. "I hear you've come to help us out in our little bit of trouble."

"Well, I shall be staying here until after the inquest. I understand from the prioress that you will be present at it."

"That's right, ma'am. I was first on the scene, so I'll be wanted."

"What were the circumstances?"

"Well, long before somebody broke into the school and made a proper mess chucking stuff out of drawers and cupboards and that, I had orders to lock the gates of an evening and open up again each morning, which I always done. Me being the caretaker, my cottage is in the grounds, so to open up I has to pass the lower pond on my way across to here. Well, that partic'lar day it was a bit misty, that being the way of it these early autumn mornings; but it wasn't so misty as what I says to myself as I come up by the pond, 'Hullo, 'ullo, 'ullo,' I says to myself, 'so what have we here?' I says.

"So I goes over to take a dekkko, and, of course, it were her, old Pussy in person, a-laying there with her feet on the bank and the rest of her, including her head, in the water. Of course, I ketches hold of her legs and pulls her out, but, naturally, she was a goner. I works on her, but I seen from the start as I was wasting my time, so I leaves her be and chases back to the school and goes in, seeing I got a key, being caretaker, and I calls up the doctor and the police on Sister Wolstan's phone, and then I goes over to the convent. But I can't see the prioress for a bit, on account it was only just after seven and Mass was still on, it being one of Father MacNicol's days for the convent chapel."

"I see. I wonder, Mr. Quince, if you would postpone your inspection of the car long enough to escort me to the pond

and show me where you found the body?"

The pond, which was about midway between the second of the ponds and the lower boundary fence of the school grounds, was a sad-looking stretch of water, larger than Dame Beatrice had anticipated. She did not need Tom Quince to point out where the body had been dragged ashore, for the spot was muddy and much trampled.

She studied it for a few moments, then said, "Did you know that something else was dragged from the pond?"

"Something else, ma'am?"

"A Bible."

"Not a great whacking big thing all black leather covers and brass clasps?"

"So you do know?"

"Not as it was dragged from the pond I never."

"Then what do you know about it?"

"Last time I see it was when I run into Mr. Chassett carrying it. 'What you got there, sir?' I says. 'The law *and* the prophets?' Well, he looks a bit soft-like and he says, 'Oh,' he says, 'one of the old ladies over to the convent asks me to get rid of it for her. Seems it's on her conscience to keep an Authorised Version instead of Douai. Her old grandpa or some such left it to her,' he says, 'and she hadn't liked to chuck it away, but Father MacNicol think it best,' he says, 'and being as she's tied up at the convent, she's asked me to do sommat about it.' So I suppose he chucked it in the pond as being the easiest way to get rid of it. Not as I believe that yarn about Father MacNicol, him being far too sensible a man to have said what she told Mr. Chassett, and a Bible's a Bible in any language, I s'pose."

"Interesting," said Dame Beatrice. She stood for another few moments, then thanked him and made her way over to the school. The sound of singing which met her ears as she approached the front door indicated that Assembly was still in progress, so she entered the vestibule with the

intention of waiting there until Sister Hilary should be at liberty.

She was not left alone. As the front door swung to behind her, Sister Wolstan emerged from the secretary's office and greeted her.

"Sister won't be long," she said. "I have a basket chair in my cubby-hole. Do come in and sit down while you're waiting."

"I've just been looking at the pond," said Dame Beatrice, accepting the invitation and seating herself.

"Oh, yes? Sister intends to have it filled in as soon as we are clear of this distressing business. She has been in communication with Reverend Mother, our Superior, and it is all arranged. We are expecting her at any time now. Naturally she wishes to inform herself of what has happened and this cannot be done satisfactorily by letters or over the telephone."

"Ah, yes, letters," said Dame Beatrice. "Letters, I understand, may be at the bottom of this business. What was their general purport? Were they merely scurrilous and abusive, or did they contain definite accusations or threats?"

"Well," said Sister Wolstan, "I have not seen those sent to the homes of the secular staff. Those that came to the convent harped mostly on the theme that most of us were failures in life and had taken refuge in the convent because we wanted to opt out (as I believe the expression is) of trying conclusions with the world. There were two only that were any more unpleasant than that. One was sent to Sister Mary Romuald, the other to the headmistress, Sister Hilary."

"Why was Sister Mary Romuald singled out, I wonder?"

"You will know that when you see her."

"Oh, really? The headmistress, I assume, received special treatment simply because she *is* the headmistress."

"Not quite. The writer accused her of having been put in prison before she Entered and of having secured an early

release because of her 'friendship' with the prison doctor. The word was put between inverted commas, of course."

"Ah, yes," said Dame Beatrice. "Now, Sister, you and the others must be tired of answering questions, but there is one I would like to put to you personally."

"That sounds ominous."

"Not at all. It is merely this: has Quince ever said anything to you about his finding of the body? Anything he may not have mentioned to anyone else?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure he has not."

There was the sound of footsteps. The headmistress had come from Assembly. A bell rang in the secretary's tiny office. Sister Wolstan said, "I must go. Please excuse me." Two minutes later she was back again, and said:

"Sister Hilary's compliments, and she wonders whether you would like to talk to her before you see the staff."

"It will be a pleasure," said Dame Beatrice. Led by Sister Wolstan, she crossed the vestibule and was shown into Sister Hilary's office. The headmistress, seated behind a large desk, smiled in welcome and offered a chair. Sister Wolstan, after an enquiring glance at the headmistress, withdrew, closing the door.

"Well, now," said Sister Hilary invitingly.

"I have been to the pond."

"It cannot have told you very much."

"It is larger than I had expected. I noticed that it cannot be overlooked, from either the windows of the convent or those of the school. It would also, I think, be screened from the caretaker's cottage."

"Yes, there is a belt of trees that would screen it."

"So that if somebody threw something into the pond . . ."

"You are not referring to Miss Lipscombe's death, I hope!"

"Only very indirectly. I am referring to Miss Lipscombe's Family Bible."

“Oh, I heard that it had been dragged from the pond. The inspector asked for a possible explanation. I wish now that I had not wasted people’s time and effort.”

“Doing what?”

“Going through all the books in the school library. The convent library was searched, too, and our own private bookshelves.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I am placing this room at your disposal for the rest of the morning. I thought you might like to talk to the staff in here. Do you wish me to sit in at the interviews?”

“I can hardly turn you out of your own room.”

“So that is the answer,” said Sister Hilary, smiling. “Very well. I can use Sister Wolstan’s room for this morning, as she is going to tidy the big stock cupboard and check the stock against our next Requisition.” She turned her full, fine eyes upon Dame Beatrice. “I know I need not ask you to handle my teachers gently,” she said. “I value them highly and, for the salaries we pay, it is not easy to obtain satisfactory replacements.”

“I appreciate your offering to let me use your room, but I should explain that it is not my intention to question your staff individually at present. I should very much like to meet them, but en masse and in an environment where they will feel at home.”

“Well, we have three common rooms here. The secular staff have one for the women and another for the men, and the Sisters have their own room. Quite often, however, the women invite the others in for morning coffee and afternoon cups of tea at break. But during free periods marking of books is carried on in the separate rooms so that everybody gets a measure of privacy and the men can enjoy their pipes, indulge in masculine conversation, and share the kind of stories that, in mixed company, might be in questionable taste.”

“It sounds an admirable arrangement.”

"I will drop a hint to Mrs. Fennell to see that everybody takes coffee this morning in the women's staff room, then. Break is at a quarter to eleven. Again, I take it, you do not wish me to be present."

"I think not, if you don't mind; neither you nor Sister Mary Wolstan, if that will not inconvenience either of you."

"Not at all. More often than not Sister Wolstan and I have coffee together in my room while we get on with some work." She smiled again, her red lips parting to show strong, white teeth. "The staff—the religious and the seculars alike—often have subjects to discuss and opinions to air that are better not overheard by me, although I fancy Sister Wolstan keeps an ear pretty close to the ground."

"That is very sensible of her, I think."

"It's very useful to *me*," said Sister Hilary.

Dame Beatrice returned to Sister Wolstan's tiny office.

"There is one thing," said the nun.

"The caretaker?"

"Oh, yes. Probably what he said to me is of no importance, but, for what it's worth, here goes. You know he was the person that found the body?"

"And did his best to resuscitate it. Yes, he told me so."

"He described how he dragged her out of the water, I suppose? Well, he also told me that he thought someone had been there before him—someone who might have tried to pull her out of the pond, but had failed. I wonder why he or she did not summon help, if Quince is right?"

"Possibly the would-be rescuer realised that it *was* a body and not a living person. Anyway, I had better see Quince and find out whether he has mentioned this to the inspector."

She found Tom Quince over at the pigsties. He put down a bucket of swill, wiped his hands down the seams of his trousers, and greeted her cordially.

"Do anything for you, ma'am?"

"Yes, Mr. Quince, if you will. I've just been talking with Sister Wolstan. She tells me that you deduced, when you found the body, that somebody else had tried to drag it out of the water."

"That's right, ma'am. That was the conclusion I come to."

"You must have had some reason for thinking so."

"Well, it was the way she was laying, ma'am. Flat on its face, the body was, and the feet above what you might call high water mark—on the bank, as you might say. Didn't look natural to me, neither for accident nor even supposing she done it herself, like. The bank was fair wet and trampled over, too, before I makes *my* hoof-marks on it."

"Could not that have been done by children playing there?"

"'Tain't allowed, without there ain't a teacher. Besides, it was biggish shoes, not kids' footmarks, as I seen, although kind of scuffed out, like, if you follow me."

"Have you told Inspector Cramond all this?"

"Oh, I *told* him," said Tom, "but whether he took notice, well, that I couldn't say, ma'am."

"Did you receive an abusive letter, Quince?"

"From that old pussy? No, I didn't, then. I've never got nothing worse than a summons for speeding, and that was years ago."

Dame Beatrice returned to the school and to Sister Wolstan's basket chair. The secretary made her welcome.

"Quince had told the inspector, I suppose?" she asked. "About the position of the body, I mean."

"Yes, indeed, but he is not certain to what extent his information was deemed to be important."

CHAPTER 12

Interrogation and Surmise

“While some on earnest business bent
Their murmuring labours ply. . .
Some bold adventures disdain
The limits of their little reign . . .
They hear a voice in every wind,
And snatch a fearful joy.”

Thomas Gray

Dame Beatrice looked at her wristwatch. There was time to spare before she was due to meet the staff at ten forty-five. Looking up again as she left the front door of the school, she was pleased, but not surprised, to see her car on the gravel outside and her chauffeur in attendance.

“Ah, George,” she said, as he opened the car door for her, “You anticipated that I should be taking a little trip, did you?”

“No, madam, but it’s quite a step back to the convent, so I thought I might drive you over there.”

“What I want is the village.”

“The parents of the child who was injured by the convent car, madam, live at number eleven. I have the information from Mr. Quince.”

The front door of the cottage opened directly on to the street. Such garden as it possessed was in the rear. Dame Beatrice knocked on the door and it was opened by a

woman smoking a cigarette and wearing a scarlet shirt, washed-out blue jeans, and an apron upon which was depicted a lion rampant holding aloft a Union Jack.

"Mrs. Garfish?" asked Dame Beatrice, having learnt this name from George, who had had it, as well as the address, from Tom Quince.

"I don't want nothing. I don't buy nothing at the door," said the woman defensively, not troubling to remove the cigarette from her lips.

"You write letters, though."

"Letters?"

"Nasty, threatening letters."

"Here!" said the woman, looking frightened. "What you mean? You call again when my 'usband is a-tome."

"That will be unnecessary. May I come in?"

"I don't want no trouble."

"I shall make none. I only want a word with you about a letter you wrote some time ago to the nun who is headmistress of the convent school."

"That's all over and done with."

"How many letters did you send?"

"What's that to do with you? Go and do your nosey-parkering some place else." She attempted to close the door, but Dame Beatrice's firmly clad foot was over the threshold.

"Look, Mrs. Garlish," she said coaxingly, "you would rather talk to me than to the police, wouldn't you? You don't know it yet, but an elderly woman who lodged at the convent has died in mysterious circumstances and we are. . ."

Before she could finish the sentence the woman moved back and opened wide the door.

"Better you come in," she said. "I don't want no trouble."

"Of course you don't." The front door opened on to a small, stuffy, scrupulously clean sitting-room in which the

woman unnecessarily dusted a chair with the end of her patriotic apron before inviting Dame Beatrice to sit down. "The affair is in the hands of the police and we want to get one or two things cleared up before the inquest is held."

"Inquest?"

"Yes. As I told you, this woman's death is a mystery at present."

"What did she die of, then?"

"She was drowned."

"Done it herself, did she?"

"Presumably."

"Us didn't write no letters to no ladies, only to the school. I writ the first one and my man, he said it wasn't strong enough put, so he writ the second one, saying as how we didn't want no nuns killing our kids."

"And those were the only two letters you sent to the school?"

"God's truth they was. Do you mean the poor soul drowned herself because of letters? We never meant no harm to nobody and the way it was put in court seems our Marlene run straight out into the road, being chased by Willie Stegg, as she've been forbid to play with no more."

"You did not write separately to the teachers who are not nuns?"

"Course we never. Don't know 'em, do we?"

"Nor to the prioress at the convent?"

"We writ to the school, like I said."

"How did you address the envelopes?"

"The Headmistress, Convent School, Little Deepening, Near Bristington. That's how, and we only writ the two letters. Surely we won't be blamed for that, not after all this time?"

"No. If those are the only letters you sent, you will not be held in any way responsible for this woman's death. Your letters were a matter which needed clearing up and that has now been done. Thank you for talking to me, Mrs. Garlish. I

am sure you can put the whole thing out of your mind. How is your little girl?"

"Oh, all right. She had a bit of a shock as well as hurting of herself, but she's got over it. She's in the school netball team now."

The school staff, gathered together for mid-morning coffee, had been apprised by Sister Wolstan of Dame Beatrice's coming and she was warmly greeted. Sister Wolstan effected the necessary introductions, then disappeared to have her own cup of coffee with Sister Hilary, leaving Mrs. Fennell to carry on.

The deputy headmistress supplied the visitor with coffee and a biscuit, then asked, "Do you want to chat or are you going to sit and observe us?"

"Both," Dame Beatrice replied. "Later on I shall be interviewing you one by one, but I thought it best to obtain a general impression first." She glanced around her. The staff were grouped in the three sections to which they belonged. With Mrs. Fennell were the long-legged, track-suited, crop-haired Nancy Webb and the pocket-sized Venus Petrella Grey, who wore a brief tunic of Mediterranean blue and whose hair was cut to back-of-collar length with a long fringe over her forehead like that of a little boy. She was vivacious and very pretty, but nobody in the room had any pretensions to good looks compared with the outstanding, astonishing beauty of the nun who was seated opposite Dame Beatrice among the rest of her group.

Mrs. Fennell herself was a dark-haired woman of great charm, with large, hazel eyes, a frank expression, very fine, sensitive hands, and a lovely mouth which was the key, Dame Beatrice thought, to her whole character. She was of medium height and beautifully formed. Her clothes were unobtrusive but good and her feet were soberly but expensively shod. She also looked what she was—an

invaluable member of a school staff, good humoured unless she was brought face to face with injustice or rudeness. In that case, however, Dame Beatrice surmised that her eyes could flash imperious warnings of a temper kept with difficulty under control. She was, in all probability, of very considerable artistic ability, (so ran the observer's thoughts), a musician or maybe a painter. Her whole personality was particularly pleasing, so much so that Dame Beatrice found herself thinking that the term "special advantage group" for Mrs. Fennell's backward class was not so much of a misnomer after all.

With Sister Romuald on the side of the room opposite to Dame Beatrice were the rest of the teacher-nuns—fat, easy-going Honorius; moon-faced, guileless Raymund; worried-looking, long-faced Leo; cheerful, careless Fabian; and tight-lipped, severe, and cold-eyed Elphege. They all sat on high-backed, armless wooden chairs, the most comfortable seats having been appropriated as of right by the three men, who formed a separate group around a small electric fire. They had risen at Dame Beatrice's entry and the tallest and broadest of them, a fair-haired young man who had been introduced as Mr. Chassett, had made a faint attempt to offer her his chair, but Sister Wolstan had swept her onwards to where Mrs. Fennell had an armchair waiting for the visitor.

Ronald Chassett wore a neat blue overall with his neat, blue, serge trousers. Bevis Fletcher and Gilbert Murphy were in the traditional uniform of assistant schoolmasters, shirt, woollen pullover, tweed jacket, and grey flannel trousers. Both were smoking cigarettes out of deference to their surroundings, although each would have preferred a pipe. Ronald Chassett did not smoke and neither did any of the women, though Sister Fabian had found the loss of her cigarettes the hardest of all the losses which she had accepted and suffered when she Entered.

While Dame Beatrice was summing up the various personalities and conversing with Frances Fennell about the New Forest, the break was passing all too quickly and an electric bell soon put an end to it.

"By the way," said Frances, as, led by the nuns, the company began to rise and make for the door, "will you all see that your classes have work to get on with for when you are called out? Your girls, Ronald, had better be turned on to the field and the woodwork shed locked up while you are talking to Dame Beatrice. They can't be left unsupervised with a lot of tools about. It won't be for long, because Dame Beatrice is going to leave you until last. You're first, Nancy, so if you'll get a game of hockey started and then go straight along to Sister Hilary's room, we need not waste Dame Beatrice's time."

"I can come straight away," said Nancy Webb, walking out of the staff room with the visitor, her tall, athletic figure making Dame Beatrice look even thinner and smaller than usual. "Ursula Brown knows exactly what to do if I don't show up at the beginning of a lesson. It's the Lower Fifth, so it will be quite all right. They're a keen lot, not like the lazy, aristocratic Sixth."

"Are games compulsory here?" Dame Beatrice enquired, as they walked towards the headmistress's door.

"I make 'em so, unless there's a doctor's report; otherwise some of the little beasts wouldn't turn out at all. What are you going to grill us about?"

"Anonymous letters."

"Oh, Lord! That muck!"

"Was it?"

"Of course. All sorts of filthy accusations."

"True ones?"

"In my case, no. I don't know about anybody else."

As they reached the headmistress's door, Sister Hilary came out, smiled, and said,

"Do go in. I've taken out all the papers I need for the rest of the morning. School lunch is at half-past twelve, Dame Beatrice, so the staff would like to be free by about twenty past to wash their hands and so forth, and get along to the refectory."

"Now," said Dame Beatrice, taking out a small notebook when she and Miss Webb were seated, "this anonymous letter you received—or were there more than one?"

"One only. You can guess what it accused me of, I expect."

Dame Beatrice noted the broad shoulders, the strong jaw, the long legs, and the large hands and feet of her companion and thought she could.

"You're wrong," said Nancy Webb. "What it accused me of was being an unconvicted murderess, so I said in the staff room that if anybody wanted to be funny at my expense, I hoped she'd put her name at the end of her next letter, upon which it would give me great pleasure to twist her head off and so prove that she wasn't that far out."

"How many people heard you say it?"

"The whole boiling except the boss and Sister Wolstan and those nuns who stay over in the convent. Not that nuns would write that sort of letter, but I guessed that one of them would pass on my remarks, so that they registered in the proper quarter."

"The proper quarter being . . .?"

"This old cat who's drowned herself. That is, unless somebody saved her the trouble."

"So that is what you think?" said Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, steady on, now I didn't say that. I can't see her committing suicide, that's all. Catholics don't, you know."

"Could it have been an accident?"

"I shouldn't think so, unless she'd been into town and got drunk and tumbled into the pond in the dark, but none of that is in the least likely."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

“Because Mother—I mean Sister St. Elmo—would bung anybody out of the house in no time who carried on in that sort of way, although I believe old Mrs. Wilks used to break out after seven o’clock supper and go to bingo sessions in the village. Tom Quince told me she did.”

“And that was condoned?”

“Well, they’re not prisoners, are they?”

Dame Beatrice’s next visitor was the attractive Mrs. Fennell. Her letter, she stated, had accused her of being a man-trap and of deceiving her husband.

“Stupid really,” she said, “because I never go out without Bill except to our Catholic discussion group. I’m a convert, you see, and Bill is Church of England.”

“What did you do with your letter?”

“I threw it away after I’d shown it to my husband.”

“How did he take it?”

“The same way as I did. We both thought it was a joke until the same person—well, I assume it was the same person—sent *him* a letter. When he read mine he said, ‘Well, and what have you been up to?’ I said, ‘Couldn’t he read,’ and we both laughed and he put me across his knee and smacked me and—well, it was quite fun after that. It wasn’t fun at all, though, when the other letter came, this time addressed to him and couched in really offensive terms. Bill wanted to take it to the police.”

“Do you know who else on the staff received an anonymous missive?”

“Well, Miss Webb showed me hers and asked me what I thought she ought to do about it. This was before Bill’s filthy letter arrived, so I suggested she did the same as I’d done with mine. I didn’t tell her I thought poor old Miss Lipscombe had sent them, and I don’t think she had any suspicions of her at that point. I think she then thought it was somebody in the village. She said she would twist the writer’s head off if she ever found out who it was, and that she would be obliged if the rest of us would broadcast that statement.”

"She was sure, then, that the writer was a woman?"

"I suppose so. I thought the same. Men don't write that sort of letter, do they?"

"Did you show your letter to anybody but your husband?"

"No. It was flattering, you see, in a peculiar kind of way, and people might have thought I was conceited!"

"Was it the only letter of the kind which was sent to you personally?"

"To me, yes, but a bit later on, as I said, she sent that other one to Bill, and that one wasn't funny at all. He said that this was beginning to look like persecution and that if it went on he would have to go to the police. Naturally I didn't want it to go so far as that. Another thing he said he did not believe that his letter and mine came from the same person."

"Forgive the question," said Dame Beatrice, "but, in the case of the first letter (which, I gather, was a matter more for laughter than concern) was there any grain of truth in it at all?"

"Well, *that's* a leading question, if you like!" said Frances, laughing and blushing. "Bevis and Gilbert have both made passes at me, but, needless to say, didn't get anywhere."

"But no more letters came to your house?"

"No, thank goodness, and I'm pretty sure no more *will* come now that poor old Miss Lipscombe is dead."

"You do not agree with your husband, then, that your letter and his came from different sources?"

"No, I don't. I think *my* letter was an attempt to find out how I reacted and *his* letter was the real thing; and that both came from old Miss Lipscombe."

The next visitor was Petrella Grey.

"Yes, I had a letter," she said. "It was a bit of a giggle, actually. It accused me of being a shoplifter."

"With no truth, I take it?"

“Well,” said Petrella, “there was a bit of a scene at the supermarket once. I’d been to the sweet shop before I collected the groceries—I live with my mother, just the two of us, and I collect the groceries on my way home from school on Fridays—and as it happened I’d pushed a big slab of nut-milk chocolate into my coat pocket so that it stuck out and showed quite clearly what it was. I went to the pay-desk with my wire basket and decanted the various groceries for the girl to check, and then she said, ‘Haven’t you forgotten something?’ I said I didn’t think so. So she said, ‘The chocolate in your coat pocket.’ Of course I explained that I hadn’t bought it there, but she called the store detective.”

“While you were still inside the shop?”

“Oh, yes. She knew me quite well, you see, because I always shopped there, and naturally she didn’t want a fuss if she was in the wrong. So I took out the chocolate and the store detective said, ‘That’s not our price tag,’ so the girl apologised and said she’d only been doing her duty, which was true, I suppose.”

“So to whom did you report this occurrence?”

“I told my mother when I got home and she said she supposed the supermarket sold the same kind of chocolate and that another time I’d better do the supermarket first and the confectioner’s later, that’s all.”

“You told nobody but your mother about this?”

“Nobody. But one of those beastly old convent boarders was behind me in the queue—the one who’s left—and she must have heard it all. Wilks, her name is, and I suppose she wrote the letter. It was postmarked Bristington, so I suppose that’s where she lives now.”

“But if you had not left the shop when the incident occurred, she must have known that you would be exonerated.”

“That wouldn’t weigh with a nasty old woman who wanted to write horrible letters, would it?”

"She may have retailed the story to somebody else, of course."

"To the other old dears, you mean? I suppose she could have done," agreed Petrella Grey reluctantly; but it was evident that she did not think so. "I expect she revelled in having something to gloat over," she added. "Their lives must be as dull as tombs, I should imagine."

The three men on the staff, in very brief interviews, declared that they had received no anonymous letters. By the time Dame Beatrice had finished with them it was twenty minutes to twelve. She tapped on the secretary's door to let Sister Hilary know that her room was free and then her chauffeur took her to the front door of the convent.

Outside it she saw the inspector's car and just as she reached it he got out, saw her, and came to meet her.

"We've had the full post-mortem account, ma'am," he said. "Death was by drowning. No signs of violence. There's no doubt what the verdict at the inquest will be, but I don't any longer believe it was suicide, ma'am. It's only a hunch, but I can't help thinking she was murdered."

"You have nothing more to go on than a hunch, Inspector?"

"I've had a word again with Mrs. Polkinghorne. There's no doubt what *she* thinks, and she knew the deceased pretty intimately, having lived in the same house with her for so long."

"She suggests that, although most of the accusations made in the letters are either untrue or very much exaggerated, one letter contains an accusation both unexaggerated and damaging. You now believe that the person who received that particular letter is a murderer."

"That's about the size of it, to my way of thinking, ma'am. What's your own impression?"

"I am inclined to agree with you. I have been talking to members of the school staff and three of them have given me what I regard as useful pointers."

“To the letter writer?”

“No, to the validity of your argument. The letters I have had described to me—most unfortunately they have been destroyed, so what I learnt was not first-hand evidence—contain no complete truths, but the accusations in them are remarkably suggestive. The letter sent to Mrs. Fennell, for instance, suggests that she is a man-trap.”

“I see what you mean, ma’am. So she could be, had she a mind to it, I’ll wager. She’s what I call (if you’ll pardon the phrase) a proper honey-pot. I know the family well, being that Mr. Fennell is chairman of the local Bench and, of course, I’m often called to the courts. So what was written to Mrs. Fennell *could* be true, except that it isn’t, and it *could* be damaging if her husband was the jealous sort.”

“Especially as her husband received a letter to the same effect, but couched, apparently, in much more offensive terms.”

“That wouldn’t affect Mr. Fennell, ma’am, so far as his feeling for his wife is concerned, but, naturally, it *would* make him see red about the writer and be out for her blood.”

“Not literally, I hope, Inspector.”

“Slip of the tongue, ma’am. I only meant he’d want to go all out to trace the writer and bring her to book. How about the other ladies?”

“The physical education specialist was accused of having murderous tendencies. She seems to have taken the bull by the horns and announced her intention of twisting the writer’s head off. The dance and drama teacher’s letter referred to an incident in the local supermarket.”

“Shoplifting?”

“Yes, but she was exonerated quickly and completely before she left the premises.”

“But there was something to go on? Yes, I can see the mischief-making at work. What about the rest of them?”

"I have yet to question the nuns. The three men on the staff do not appear to have received anonymous letters. At least, that is what they claim."

At two-thirty that afternoon Dame Beatrice was again in Sister Hilary's office. On the desk in front of her were the letters sent to the nuns. The inspector had returned them to the prioress and she had handed them on to Dame Beatrice. They made interesting reading. The letter, for instance, which had been sent to Sister Wolstan accused her of embezzling convent funds.

"So whoever it is must know that I am the bursar here," Sister Wolstan, already interviewed, had remarked. "It does narrow it down, Dame Beatrice, don't you think?"

No letters had been received by old Sister Ignatius ("so the writer has *some* sense of decency" had been the prioress's remark) or by Sister Marcellus. Dame Beatrice, sorting the rest of the letters on the desk, had arranged them in some sort of order. She rang the bell which put her into communication with the secretary's office and gave Sister Wolstan a list of names she had written down.

"Sister Fabian first? Quite so," said Sister Wolstan, going off to separate the art mistress from a class which, apparently, was smothering itself in poster paint. Sister Wolstan quelled it with a martial eye and said that she would remain in charge of it until Sister Fabian returned. Accustomed to the law and order of her previous shorthand classes and the rhythmic clacking of typewriters following the sounds of music played on records, Sister Wolstan was a martinet where discipline was concerned, and the school knew it.

Sister Fabian tapped at the office door, heard the expected invitation, went in, and was offered a chair.

"What, no couch?" she said blithely. "I thought we were going to be psycho-analysed."

"How much truth is there in the anonymous letter you received?" asked Dame Beatrice, picking it up from the top

of the pile.

"*Some* truth," replied Fabian, sobering down. "I *was* expelled from school, but not for immorality, so-called. It was for starting a rather outspoken magazine—outspoken about school meals and the head sucking up to the rich girls' parents, and all that sort of thing. True enough, actually, but not well received by the head."

"Deplorable," said Dame Beatrice gravely. "What made you enter a convent, I wonder?"

"A convent school was the only one which would take me. I liked and admired the nuns and got converted, and then I travelled pretty extensively with my widower father, then I went to art school and kicked over the traces a bit, but it didn't satisfy me, so here I am. Of course I thought, being ignorant and young, as Yeats says somewhere, that I'd be commissioned to paint holy pictures—that kind of thing—instead of which I find myself stuck here teaching children to slap poster paint on to coloured paper and to model pigs and ducks out of soggy clay. It's not a bad life and I have the run of the art room here to do my own work in my spare time, such as it is, and during school holidays. It's quite good fun, on the whole, and Sister Hilary gives me a free hand. That's one of my things on the wall over there. There's another one in the chapel. They wanted one for the refectory, but there's a Giacomo Palma the Elder in there, and comparisons are odious."

The rest of the letters were either ridiculous or contained statements it was impossible to prove one way or the other. Thus Sister Elphege was accused of having a mother who had collaborated with the Germans during the last war; Sister Leo of having an uncle who had contracted a venereal disease; poor young innocent Raymund of having attempted to kill the village child whom she had knocked down with the convent car. Perhaps the most ridiculous accusations of all had been reserved for Sister Hilary. Her first letter stated that she had served a prison sentence for

joining the IRA and planting bombs; the second accused her of having given orders to the convent drivers to slaughter a child with the convent car to punish the non-Catholic village for ignoring the true Faith and added the story about the prison doctor.

Sister Honorius was told that she was cruel to pigs and Sister Romuald was accused of using cosmetics to enhance her natural beauty. Dame Beatrice found herself quoting: “Up then spake the nut-brown bride—she spake wi’ mickle spite: ‘And where gat ye the rose-water that washes thy face so white?’ She cackled as she remembered the unanswerable and equally spiteful reply: “‘Oh, I did get my rose-water where ye will ne’er get nane, for I did get that very rose-water into my mither’s warne.’”

“Quod erat demonstrandum,” said Dame Beatrice.

CHAPTER 13

Verdict

“ . . . and will, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will, a true verdict give according to the evidence . . . ”

Anon.

There were seven jurors, six witnesses, and two solicitors at the inquest on Lilian Charlotte Lipscombe, besides a couple of journalists and a fair attendance in the public gallery. There were also present the coroner, his officials and an impassive policeman on duty at the door of the courtroom. Among the witnesses were Sister St. Elmo, Sister Marcellus, and (to the obvious surprise of these) Mrs. Wilks. Among the spectators in the public gallery was Dame Beatrice.

The coroner opened the proceedings, after the usual swearing in of the jurors, with a long-winded account of the case as he saw it. In essentials it boiled down to what everybody in court already knew, so, having pompously charged the jury, to whom his remarks specifically were addressed, to base their opinion strictly upon the evidence they were about to hear and to approach the case with open minds, he called the first witness; and Tom Quince, in a clean shirt and with his hair carefully brushed, took the stand and the oath.

After he had given his evidence, which was that he had found the body, Sister St. Elmo was called upon to identify

it. Then the coroner said to her,

“The deceased had lived at the convent for how long?”

“For five years and a few months.”

“What was her state of mind?”

“She had all her faculties.”

“No, no—although it is helpful to know that. I meant to ask whether she was happy with you.”

“So far as I know, she was as happy as any lonely old lady can be, though I should prefer to say contented rather than happy. Resigned might be the correct word.”

“Was she moody?”

“Not so far as I was aware.”

“Can you account for her having gone over to the pond from which the last witness says he dragged her?”

“No, I cannot account for it at all.”

“Thank you. Call Sister Marcellus. Now, Sister, when did you last see the deceased alive?”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” moaned Sister Marcellus. “I felt sure you were going to ask me that. As though I have time, with all I have to do, to bother about when I saw people last. What with cooking and shopping, and cleaning and . . .”

“Please be so good as to answer to the question, Sister. If you cannot remember when you last saw the deceased alive, you are to say so. We quite understand how busy you must be, but that applies to the rest of us, too, you know. Now, then, is there nothing that will remind you of when you last saw Miss Lipscombe?”

“If you had asked me a sensible question in the first place I could have given you a sensible answer. Of course something reminds me. She broke a plate at supper-time.”

“Which day would that have been?”

“That same day. Well, I suppose I should say the evening before. She came into the kitchen with her supper-tray—to wash up her own things, as usual—and said, ‘Oh, Sister, I’ve had a little accident. I suppose I shall have to pay.’ I looked at the pieces she showed me and then I

looked in my book because, of course, they don't have to pay unless they wish to. It is a matter of conscience."

"Yes, yes. And that was the last you saw of her, so far as you remember?"

"Yes. I suppose she went back to the parlour or to her own room after that, but I don't know for certain where she went because Sister Mary Hilary and Sister Mary Wolstan were going to be at second tables and I had to put their supper ready for them. They were working late over at school, you see, so they did not have supper with the rest of us, and it had been Sister Mary Fabian's turn on the washing-up rota, but Sister is . . ."

"Yes, thank you, Sister. You may stand down. Call Doctor Catto."

The doctor was a large, slightly gorilla-like young man who looked what he was, prop forward in the county rugby fifteen. He took the oath in a hushed voice as though he was afraid, if he spoke in his natural tones, of bringing plaster down from the courtroom ceiling; then replied to the coroner's questions.

He had been called to the convent at breakfast time and had seen the body at about a quarter to nine.

"You had no doubt as to the cause of death?"

"None at all; although, of course, a post-mortem examination of a more detailed kind was carried out later. Deceased had been drowned." He proceeded to give particulars.

"Were there any signs of injury?"

"None. There was some post-mortem staining, as one would expect, but no wounds or contusions."

"Can you estimate the probable time of death?"

"Not with accuracy, but I should put it at between nine o'clock and midnight. That is to say, my colleague and I, who carried out the autopsy, calculate that death had taken place some nine to twelve hours before I made my first inspection of the body, but that is only a rough estimate."

"You allowed, of course, for the fact that the body had been found lying in water? That would make a difference, would it not?"

"It would mean that the body cooled a good deal more rapidly than would have been the case if death had taken place on land or in front of a fire or on a very hot day, of course."

"How was the body clad?"

"Very oddly, unless one understands old ladies of a certain class. She was wearing a woollen, long-sleeved vest, her nightdress, her stockings, and a cardigan."

"Did you deduce anything from this miscellaneous collection of garments?"

"Only that they probably formed her usual sleeping gear. After all, autumn is upon us and old ladies feel the cold, especially in bed."

"So how do you think she came to be found drowned, Doctor?"

"I think she had walked in her sleep, although it is difficult to understand, if that were so, why the shock of falling into the water did not wake her."

"Thank you, Doctor. Call Inspector Cramond. Now, Inspector, you were called, together with Doctor Catto, as soon as the body was found. No doubt you examined the bank of the pond?"

"Certainly we did, sir."

"You have heard the doctor's theory that the deceased may have been walking in her sleep when she fell into the pond and was drowned. Do your findings substantiate that premise?"

"With respect, sir, I agree and I don't agree. I agree that if the poor old lady had been walking in her sleep, the sudden immersion when she stumbled into the pond would have woke her up and she would have extricated herself without difficulty, but that's why I don't see how she could have been walking in her sleep. Unless she was set upon, I

don't see how she could have drowned, sir, but there are difficulties about that."

"Oh?" said the coroner. "So you visualise a struggle between the deceased and an assailant, do you?"

"Not without more evidence than we've got, sir. There were no marks of violence, as the doctor has told the court."

"Were there any signs of a struggle having taken place on the verge of the pond?"

"It isn't possible to say, sir, one way or the other."

"Did you look for such signs?"

"We looked for anything which might help, sir, but the sides of the pond were muddy and wet where Quince had dragged her out of the water and his footprints had roughed up the mud. We compared the boots he said he was wearing with such prints as were discernible, but others had been beside the pond, no doubt. There's a path goes right past it just there."

"I think Quince had better be recalled," said the coroner. Tom, reminded that he was still under oath, replied to the coroner's question:

"I'm sorry if I done anything wrong, sir. My only idea was to pull her out and see if there wasn't something I could do for the poor soul in case she wasn't yet quite gone. She was dressed like the doctor said, but her clothes, sir, was all waterlogged. Her feet was just resting on the bank, sir, and she was that weighty, being dead and helpless with it, as I had to wrestle hard, as you might say, sir, to drag her out so's I could get to work and give her the kiss of life, and all that. Also I might say, sir . . ."

"I see. Well, it appears that you did your best and, of course, there seems no valid or sufficient reason to suspect foul play. Recall Doctor Catto . . . Now, Doctor, would your post-mortem examination have revealed whether the deceased had taken drugs before she was drowned? The fact that the water does not seem to have woken her up prompts me to ask the question."

"She had not taken anything of that kind, so far as I know, but some drugs leave little trace," replied Catto.

"I am not referring to what are known, I believe, as 'hard' drugs. I mean such things as aspirin tablets, tranquillisers (so-called), and that kind of thing."

"There was no trace of anything of the sort. I may add that she had not been under the influence of alcohol, either, so far as we could discover. Of course, a sudden attack of giddiness or a slip could have caused the fall and, as you have heard, a well-worn path skirts the pond just there; but, even if she was overcome by vertigo, I should have thought the shock of the cold water would have revived her."

"Thank you, Doctor. Call Jane Wilks."

Mrs. Wilks was thin and small. She had a shrewish little face and toffee-coloured eyes that looked anywhere but at the person she was addressing. She took the oath in aggressive tones and looked past the coroner as she agreed to her name and address.

"Now, Mrs. Wilks," said the coroner, "you used to live at the Convent of the Companions of the Poor, I believe?"

"That's right. Seven years."

"While you were there you knew the deceased, Miss Lipscombe, did you not?"

"Yes, the poor dear. Great friends we were."

"Were you in the habit of going out into the grounds at night? You yourself, I mean."

"What would I want to do that for?"

"Please answer my question."

"Well, not to say the grounds exactly."

"Where, then?"

"Well, how would you like to be locked in at half-past seven in the winter, half-past eight in the summer, like a lot of convicts?"

"That is beside the point, Mrs. Wilks. I asked you where you went when you left the convent after lock-up."

"If you must know, I used to go—only sometimes, mind you; I never made a habit of it, like some. Couldn't afford it, for one thing, our pensions being confiscated, as you might say, and us only getting a bit of pocket money like so many kids—well, I used to sneak out and go down to the village hall to play bingo. Well, I mean, you must have some relaxation, mustn't you?"

"There is no need for you to excuse yourself to me, Mrs. Wilks. I am sure the court quite understands that from time to time you liked to have, as it were, a little flutter. You complained just now of the early hours kept by the convent. The doors were locked, you say. How did you get out? Was it a simple matter of drawing the bolts and turning the key?"

"No, it wasn't. Too noisy, and the bolts too stiff for my rheumatic fingers."

"Would the Sisters have objected to your going down to the village to play bingo?"

"I don't know, because I never asked. What I didn't want was for Lily Lipscombe or Maria Polkinghorne to know where I went, it being no business of theirs how I used my bit of money. If you don't speculate, you can't accumulate. That's a quotation my poor late husband always had on his lips, God rest his soul."

"So you found some means of leaving the convent after lock-up without using the front door. Will you tell the court what it was?"

"It's no business of theirs, is it?"

"I think it is. We have to establish," said the coroner, with exemplary patience, "whether Miss Lipscombe could have used the same means of egress."

"She could have, if she'd known of it, but she didn't know. The downstairs windows were barred, on account our rooms used to be the boarding school dormitories, but I found out by accident that the whole set of bars outside my window lifted out. It was for air raids in the war or in case of fire, I suppose."

"So you got out of the window and came back again by the same means when your bingo session was over?"

"That's right. It's only a step to the ground."

"Now, Mrs. Wilks, that window opens on to the convent car-park. (Let the jury see a plan of the grounds, please.) But the police have informed me that the double gates to the car-park are always locked at night. How, then, did you reach the village? I assume that you did not scale the locked gates?"

"The bingo was only on in the autumn and winter, and I used to wait until it was dark, or darkish, so that I wouldn't be seen when I went out. You had to walk over to the school car-park to reach the street, you see, and that meant crossing the grounds. The school car-park isn't locked, so that's the way I went."

"Passing by the large pond?"

"Yes, if you kept to the path."

"Did you not keep to the path?"

"Yes, if it was dark and my torch was working. Moonlight nights I cut across the school field without going near the pond. It was quicker."

"Are you sure that you never took Miss Lipscombe with you, or shared with her the secret of your escape route?"

"Quite sure. She hadn't the money for bingo. Besides, I couldn't trust her."

"Not to betray the existence of the outlet, I suppose. Well," the coroner looked at the jury, "that explains how Miss Lipscombe could have made her way to the pond."

"Only if she knew about the bars, and she didn't know," said the witness. "I'm sure she didn't know." She had raised her voice and spoken with emphasis.

"Oh, yes, she did," interjected Tom Quince.

"Recall that witness," said the coroner. "Mrs. Wilks, you may stand down. Now, my man, what makes you so sure that Miss Lipscombe knew about those loose bars?"

“Simple, sir. She asked me to have ’em cemented back in.”

“Why was that?”

“Claimed she was nervous. Said if you could get out that way, somebody could get in.”

“She said that, did she? Had she any reason to suppose that anybody would wish to get in?”

“She was one of these old-fashioned old maids, sir—maiden ladies, I should say. You know what they’re like, sir. Burglars-under-the-bedders is my name for ’em, asking your pardon if I speaks out of turn, sir.”

“And *did* you fix the bars as she requested?”

“No, sir. I couldn’t do nothing about it without I got permission of Sister St. Elmo and I never thought she’d agree, being the window was a fire precaution, but I believe she did think about it. The old party—that is to say, the deceased, sir—well, it wasn’t even her room. She changed over into it for a bit, but she soon changed back again when she found out about them bars, so she knowed about ’em all right, sir.”

“Well,” said the coroner, “I think, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard enough evidence to allow you to come to a conclusion. The deceased knew of this means of egress; she must have used it on the night of her death; she had suffered no physical injury and apparently was under no mental stress. It would be easy enough for her to have stumbled or tripped or slipped as she was passing the pond, or she may have been overcome by an attack of faintness or giddiness. I shall not dictate your verdict, although I have power to override it. Will you please retire?”

“We don’t need to retire. We’re all agreed, sir,” said the foreman, “as deceased come to her death by misadventure or, as you might say, by accident while she was a-walking in her sleep.”

CHAPTER 14

Fell or Was Pushed?

“What have you done, my lord, with the dead
body?”

—Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin.”

William Shakespeare

“Accidental death, my foot!” said Inspector Cramond disgustedly. “It was a clever move to dig up that Mrs. Wilks. Wonder who thought of doing that? Sister St. Elmo, for my money. Half Maltese, you know. They’re always devious.”

“Well, from the point of view of the convent, a verdict of accidental death is greatly to be preferred to one of murder or suicide, I suppose,” said Dame Beatrice. “No verdict can bring the dead to life again, in any case.”

“So you’re giving up and going home, ma’am, are you? I was rather hoping you would be staying on and holding a watching brief for a bit.”

“I hardly think I should be an honoured guest. There is only one circumstance that could justify my continued presence in the convent.”

“What, ma’am, would that be? Tell me, and I’ll swing it if I can.”

“Oh, dear me, no, Inspector! That would never do. I was summoned here to discover the identity of a writer of anonymous letters.”

"I thought we were agreed who that was, ma'am. To my mind, the damaged Family Bible settled it past a doubt."

"Yes," said Dame Beatrice, "I know. Suppose a spate of anonymous letters were to break out again, though?"

"You mean somebody might have tumbled to the fact, believe it or not, that there could be a bit of fun in writing them?"

"Well, I suppose there must be, in a perverted kind of way, a bit of fun, as you put it."

"Same like sadism, I reckon, if you've the stomach for that kind of thing. You don't anticipate that anything of the sort will happen, though, do you? All the same, ma'am, can I take it that you *would* stay on, if you had any kind of excuse?"

"Certainly. I am filled with the kind of curiosity that killed the cat. I am convinced that Miss Lipscombe was murdered and I'd like to be able to prove it."

"I wouldn't care to think you were sticking your neck out, ma'am."

"Oh, I am not a *favourite* cat, Inspector. I am most unlikely to be 'drowned in a tub of gold fishes,' let alone in a remarkably murky pond. By the way, I noticed that you did not refer at the inquest to the finding of that Family Bible in the pond."

"Reasons for that, ma'am. The inquest was into Miss Lipscombe's death, not into her activities before she died."

"But, in your mind and mine, the two are so closely connected as to be inseparable, surely?"

"If I'd told about the Bible and it had been produced in court, the verdict would have been the same, ma'am. The jury would have said, in fact, that it meant, more than ever, her death was accidental. They'd have said that, with such a heavy chunk of stuff like that to chuck into the pond, she was almost bound to slip on the mud and fall in."

"True, I think, except that we know she got Mr. Chassett to dispose of the Bible."

"Well, I'm not prepared to leave matters as they are, ma'am."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I'm going to give all those at the school and the convent who say they *didn't* get one of those poison-pen letters a right going over."

"Including the elderly Sister Ignatius?"

"She's old, but I'm told she's pretty fly, ma'am."

"There are three people at the convent who know pretty well all that goes on," said the inspector, "barring the deceased, who, I'm told, knew more than the other three put together, and those are Sister Wolstan for the school, Sister Marcellus (the quacking old duck) for the convent, and Tom Quince for both convent and school."

"And Sister Marcellus did not receive one of those letters."

"A bit odd, that, when you come to think of it. I mean, I can understand about the very old lady. She cuts no ice nowadays, I suppose, so there was no point in gunning for her. All the same, I should have thought she'd have got one. These anonymous devils are very cruel."

"I am prepared to believe that the writer of the letters was superstitious rather than truly religious, although she was a member of the Church."

"I don't follow you, ma'am."

"A superstitious woman brought up as a Catholic of the old-fashioned kind might think twice before sending an abusive letter to somebody who was thought to be nearing the gates of heaven, don't you think?"

The inspector shook his head doubtfully.

"I was brought up a Methodist," he said, "and I can't say I'm sorry for it, ma'am."

"Of course, the most interesting and significant non-receivers of letters are the three men teachers, don't you think?" suggested Dame Beatrice.

"No, I don't find that important, ma'am. What these poison-pens want is to rattle people and upset them. Men don't fall for it the way women do."

"Mr. Chassett struck me as a highly-strung, unhappy young man."

"Father was in the IRA, ma'am, and was put away for bomb outrages in Liverpool. Chassett's mother took her maiden name and the boy followed suit. They only came back to these parts a couple of years ago. The father fell off a wall trying to escape from quod and broke his neck. The Liverpool police followed up the wife and son and passed the dope on to our County police. We know all about Ronald Chassett, ma'am. At one time he was booked to enter a seminary to train for a priest, but either they changed their minds about taking on the son of a murderer—because that's what 'Paddy' was—or else the lad himself decided against it. The mother used to teach here, I'm told, and that's why the nuns gave the boy a job."

"What you tell me is extremely interesting, Inspector. To return to Sister Marcellus, have you decided why *she* did not receive one of the letters?"

The inspector grinned.

"I reckon she'd have marched straight up to Miss Lipscombe and challenged her," he said. "She wouldn't be the sort to worry about *proof*, and the general *feeling* was that Miss Lipscombe was the poison-pen and, what's more, nervous of being found out and exposed. I can't see Sister Marcellus mincing her words—she's a very outspoken lady and not, I would say, quite so educated as the other nuns—and she'd have taken good care to tear her off a strip in front of witnesses. I can see her lambasting Miss Lipscombe good and proper, can't you?"

At this moment a tall man of about forty came up to them and raised his hat to Dame Beatrice. The inspector said, "Good morning, sir. Dame Beatrice, this is the

Chairman of our Bench, Mr. Fennell. I think you've met his good lady. Mr. Fennell, Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley."

"I thought it must be," said the tall man. "Well, Cramond, what do you mean by letting the jury get away with a verdict like that?"

"I know, sir. Pitiful. No real examination of the evidence at all. The coroner had made up his mind beforehand, I would think. Didn't want the convent let in for a lot of stink, I suppose. He's Sister Mary Fabian's uncle, you know."

"Come, come! A little discretion, Cramond!"

"Oh, that's off the record, sir. What verdict would *you* have preferred?"

"Murder, of course. And now, if she'll permit me, I'm going to take Dame Beatrice out to lunch."

Over the luncheon table Dame Beatrice took stock of her host. She saw a broad-shouldered man, probably in his early forties or about to enter them—a blue-eyed man with reddish hair, a high-coloured complexion, and a resolute mouth that could relax into kindness and good humour.

Fennell saw a formidable old lady who could be anything between seventy and ninety, small and thin, with sharp black eyes which he was convinced would miss nothing and, having summed up what they saw, would regard it with resignation and amusement. Apart from her costume, which was of a particularly villainous shade of green topped off by a purple silk shirt-blouse, other noticeable features were her yellow, claw-like hands, her shrewd, beaky little mouth, and the unnerving cackle with which she received his lighter remarks.

She also had a beautiful speaking-voice and Fennell, who combined with a feeling for architecture a great love of music, thought that in her youth she could have been a contralto of some note, if her meagre-seeming body had had sufficient power for the concert hall.

The head-waiter, who seemed to know Fennell well, had given them a table in a secluded little alcove, so, when they

had ordered and been served, Fennell got down to the serious matter of discussing the death of Lilian Charlotte Lipscombe.

"I've been talking to my wife about this business," he said. "She was confident that the verdict would be suicide. This theory of accidental death is ridiculous. I'm very sure of that."

"Your reasons for your certainty would interest me."

"I've a strong feeling that yours will go along with them. What was an elderly, nervous woman doing down by that pond after dark?"

"Did you ever wonder whether some of the anonymous letters hinted at blackmail?"

"So that's what you think! No, it certainly had never occurred to me. It opens up possibilities, what?"

"Of a kind."

"And the blackmailer met her by appointment and murdered her? To my mind, it's a likelier story than that she tumbled into the pond by accident and got drowned. Have you mentioned it to the inspector?"

"I fancy he would have thought of it for himself, but for the fact that she was in what appear to have been her nightclothes. All the same, she could have been walking in her sleep, and, that being so, could have followed the path which leads past the pond. Therefore the theory of a slip in the dark, resulting in a fatal accident, cannot be ruled out altogether, I suppose, doubtful though it seems."

"Yet, surely, if all she did was to slip and take a toss into the water, she could have scrambled out again? That pond isn't like a gravel-pit. It doesn't shelve steeply enough to be dangerous, however deep it may be in the middle."

"True. How I wish I could see one of the more violent of the letters, or one that uttered threats. I have seen those sent to the nuns, but, although they are spiteful, ill-natured, and unseemly (considering that the recipients belong to a religious community) they are neither obscene nor

threatening. The secular members of the school staff all seem to have destroyed their letters, as seems natural enough under the circumstances. From what I am told, however, they were far more objectionable than anything that was sent to the nuns. I feel there is something to be learned from that fact."

"My wife had one of the letters. She, like the other women teachers, destroyed it. It wasn't anything very terrible, though. In fact, we laughed about it."

"Yes, I know. I also know . . ."

"That another letter, making the same accusation against Frances, was sent to me? That is so. But, although it was similar in substance, it was couched in very different terms. It was so very nasty, in fact, that I kept it. I firmly intended to take it to the police, but my wife persuaded me to procrastinate. Then, of course, that wretched old creature was drowned, and so added another dimension to the beastly business."

"Have you still got your letter?"

"Oh, yes, I have, and you shall see it if you wish, but it won't throw any light upon the matter of Miss Lipscombe's death. Unless, of course," he added, "you think I murdered the foul-minded old crone. I could have done so, too, and with pleasure!"

"The suggestion is yours, not mine I should be most interested to read your letter."

"It's pretty hot stuff, let me warn you."

"I am not easily shocked."

"Right, then. Would you care to come back to my house and look it over as soon as we've finished our lunch?"

"Yes," said Dame Beatrice, when she had read the letter in the Fennells' large, light, charming drawing room, "poetical, profane, picturesque, and pagurian."

"Pagurian?" queried Fennell.

“Partaking of the nature of the hermit-crab.”

“Ah, yes. An apt description of the Miss Lipscombes of this world, you think. They have no protection of their own, so they make for an empty shell—in her case, a room in a convent. What else do you think about the letter?”

“I think—in fact, I am sure that most of the expressions and objurgations in it can be found in the Authorised Version of the Old Testament. Did you know that Miss Lipscombe’s massive Family Bible was dragged from the pond after her body was found on the brink?”

“Oh? So the death *could* have been accidental, after all. I suppose her idea was to get rid of the evidence—my wife told me there had been some pretty plain speaking in the common room at the end of last term—and in throwing the book (I know these old Family Bibles; they have brass corners and brass fasteners and weigh about a hundredweight!) she could have slipped and fallen in and maybe stunned herself if her head collided with one of the brass-bound corners of the book.”

“There are two points which make that deduction unlikely. There was no injury to the head or any other part of the body. Moreover, the book was found in four feet of water in the middle of the pond, where she could hardly have struck her head on it. Again, unless she was prepared to wade up to her waist in muddy water, she could not have put the heavy book into the middle of the pond. As a matter of fact, we are almost certain that she got young Mr. Chassett—Quince found him carrying the Bible—to get rid of it for her some days before her death.”

“Suicide, then, you think?”

“For what reason? Once she had rid herself of the evidence she had nothing to fear. Oh, no, I am sure she was murdered, but whether the murder was premeditated, or whether it was done on the spur of the moment, I imagine we shall never know.”

“Then you know who the murderer is!”

"Far from it. I think a man is a likelier suspect than a woman. Miss Lipscombe may have been elderly, but I do not receive the impression that she was frail. Some old ladies are remarkably tough, you know."

"That brings us back to the three men on the staff."

"And Quince himself, of course. A person who states that he has found a body is always open to suspicion, no matter how soon that suspicion can be dissipated or shown to be groundless."

"You don't really suspect Tom Quince?"

"Well, let us say that in fairness to others I feel I should keep him in mind."

"How much longer do you propose to stay at the convent?"

"I shall need to consult Sister St. Elmo as to that. I am going to suggest that I leave tomorrow, provided she is satisfied that the business of the anonymous letters is now cleared up without any help from me."

"Well, look, if you do leave tomorrow, my wife and I would be delighted if you would put in a week or two with us."

"Extremely kind of you," said Dame Beatrice. "I should very much like to see more of this business."

"If the poor wretched woman *was* murdered, so should I, although this"—he flipped a finger at the letter that Dame Beatrice had laid down—"doesn't make me feel inclined to pity her."

"No, but I think something more lies behind her death than, so far, we know."

"Most likely. After all, we don't know much, do we?"

Dame Beatrice returned to the convent to find Sister Marcellus hovering in the entrance hall.

"Oh, Dame Beatrice," she said, "Sister St. Elmo is anxious to speak to you. I have been on duty here for the

past hour so that I could waylay you as soon as you came in. You called me a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord and I am sure that my poor legs are at His disposal at all times, but it seems they are now at the disposal of Sister St. Elmo; not that I complain, of course. My obedience is required of me and if I am asked to use up my strength in doing unreasonable things, there is nothing for it but to realise that in heaven all will be rewarded. But we must not lose time. Sister is in her office, so if you would please to come this way . . .”

Sister St. Elmo was seated behind her desk. In the easy chair was a formally dressed man who might have been (and was) the managing director of a prosperous business house. He rose, and the prioress performed the introductions and sent Sister Marcellus to bring in another chair.

“Mr. Cartwright has come along with a strange and perturbing story,” said Sister St. Elmo. “At the end of last term he wrote to ask us to keep his two little daughters for a matter of a fortnight or so while his young son was getting over an infectious illness.”

“The worst of youngsters in the Easter term is the way they catch things,” said Cartwright, smiling. “Half the boys at his prep school went down with measles, so they sent John home; but he collected the virus just the same. As the two girls hadn’t had it, we thought it better they should stay away until the house was clear of infection.”

“Ah, thank you, Sister,” said the prioress, as Sister Marcellus, with a martyred air, came in with a small fireside-type chair of which Cartwright relieved her. “Close the door behind you, would you? And make sure we are not disturbed, please. Now, Mr. Cartwright, perhaps you will tell Dame Beatrice your story.”

CHAPTER 15

The Cartwright Contribution

“Such brats—oh, dear me, such brats! I sadly want a reform in the construction of children. Nature’s only idea seems to make them machines for the production of incessant noise.”

Wilkie Collins

“We had no cause to feel perturbed in any way,” said the father, “until Cecilia and Angela heard about Miss Lipscombe’s death. Perhaps we ought to have tried to keep it from them, but they have always had access to books and newspapers and, in any case, if they had heard the news in no other way, they would certainly have heard the rumours which I’ve no doubt are flying round the school.”

“Well, of course, we had the police in, as you know,” said Sister St. Elmo. “Sister Hilary was much against their questioning the children, but Inspector Cramond was insistent and she felt she could not gainsay him, as the pond where Miss Lipscombe was found is in the school grounds, though out-of-bounds to the girls unless a member of staff is with them.”

“Oh, I realise that Sister Hilary had no option,” said Cartwright. “It’s an offence to obstruct the police in the execution of their duty. The point is that my daughter Cecilia, the eleven-year-old, came home from school in a state of excitement that day. She told us that the police had

been to the school, but the inspector does not appear to have told the girls that a body had been found drowned in the pond; he merely questioned them about the pond itself. Of course nobody confessed to having been anywhere near it and I daresay that was the truth. Later, Cecilia seems to have learned of Miss Lipscombe's death and for the past few days she has appeared to be worried and preoccupied and has had frightening dreams, it seems.

"In the end I asked what was troubling her. I thought she might be in hot water at school and did not want her mother and me to know about it. This, however, would have surprised me, as our children have always been open and straightforward with us. Her mother was hurt as well as surprised, but I said that we ought not to try to force confidences."

"How old are your daughters?" asked Dame Beatrice. "Eleven and . . .?"

"Eleven and nine. They have been brought up in the Catholic Faith, from the beginning. My wife comes of Catholic stock. I myself am a convert. Sometimes I think Catholic children are both older and younger than their actual age. From the age of seven, for instance, they go to Confession, which, to my mind, is a pretty mature kind of behaviour to expect from them. On the other hand, I think we tend to place far too much stress on the innocence of childhood. I don't see children as pure and happy little creatures. I think the majority of them are rather murky little devils who are also capable of feeling far greater unhappiness than most adults. We have learned, over the years, to cope with our personal demons and to grow a skin thick enough to allow us to get through life without actual, or at any rate obvious, disaster."

"So what brought matters to a head?"

"It appears that, after Confession yesterday, Cecilia asked Father MacNicol—he is our parish priest as well as

father-confessor to the convent—whether she might speak to him privately.”

“Something which could not be said in the Confessional?”

“Yes. She knew that the priest could take no action over something he had heard at Confession and she badly wanted him to take action. He took her along to the presbytery, phoned my wife to let her know where the child was, listened to her story, and sent her home with instructions to tell us all about it.”

“Which she did?”

“Oh, yes, of course. She would not disobey Father MacNicol. I don’t think I would, either.”

“And now you have come to tell this story to Sister St. Elmo.”

“And I particularly want you to hear it, Dame Beatrice,” said the prioress. “I am not a psychologist . . .”

“No?” said Dame Beatrice, giving an eldritch cackle which slightly startled her hearers. “As our American friends would say, I’m not sure I go along with that. But I interrupted you.”

“I was going to remark that you are likely to be a better judge than I am concerning the truth of the child’s story.”

“She isn’t lying,” said the father quickly.

“No, no, of course not. I am not for a moment suggesting such a thing. But young children are easily frightened, especially after dark. Also they have vivid and sometimes treacherous imaginations. Then, again, the child was in a strange house . . .” said Sister St. Elmo.

“And, from what she told us, she and her sister had listened to some sort of hobgoblin stuff from another child. I know all that, but I don’t think that her story was based on imagination. I think she *did* see something that night and I think an investigation should be made. I hope Dame Beatrice will agree with me.”

“Perhaps when I have heard the story . . .”

“Quite. Now, as I said just now, I can well imagine that Cecilia was in an unsettled frame of mind because of the bogeyman story she had heard earlier in the week about a green-faced man who peered in at windows. The consequence was that, knowing both children to be nervous, Sister very kindly moved them to an upstairs room.”

“I was persuaded largely by Sister Marcellus and Miss Lipscombe to do so,” said the prioress. “I doubt whether I should have thought of it by myself, particularly as it had been suggested to me previously and I had rejected the idea.”

“Why?” Dame Beatrice enquired. “Why did you reject it?”

“Chiefly for domestic reasons, such as the airing of mattresses, which would have needed to be carried downstairs and then upstairs again. I considered that this would make unnecessary work for Quince and Sister Marcellus.”

“Oh, yes, I see.”

“I also thought that, in a strange and very large house, the children would prefer to share a room rather than be separated at night.”

“Most reasonable and kind. By the way, did Sister Marcellus and Miss Lipscombe combine forces, so to speak, to try to persuade you to put the children on the first floor instead of on the ground floor?”

“Oh, no. Their arguments in favour of my doing so were different. Sister Marcellus thought that the children were frightened—quite rightly, as it turned out—on the ground floor. Miss Lipscombe decided they were a menace to her peace and quiet, though she claimed they might not be safe in a ground floor room whose window was kept open at the top and where the bars to that window were removable. It was an air raid exit during the war, you see, when we had school boarders living here, and we let it remain as an emergency exit in case of fire.”

"It also served as an exit for anybody who had some reason for not wishing to use the front door, I gather."

"Mrs. Wilks and Miss Lipscombe must both have used it at some time or other, it seems."

"So it may have been to Miss Lipscombe's advantage that, after Mrs. Wilks's departure, that room should remain unoccupied. But I am preventing Mr. Cartwright from telling his story." Dame Beatrice sat back, folded her yellow claws in her lap, and fixed her sharp black eyes on the narrator.

"Well, the thing happened," said Cartwright, "on the first night after they had changed rooms. They are healthy, normal children and we have never had problems about sleeplessness, let alone bed wetting or other symptoms of disturbance, but on this particular night young Angela went into her sister's room, woke her—at what time they cannot specify, but Cecilia thinks they had been in bed for some hours—and stated that she wanted to go to the lavatory."

"I had taken care that they should each be provided with a chamber pot in view of just such an emergency," protested Sister St. Elmo.

"We do not use them at home," said Cartwright, "and it is the rarest thing in the world for either child to want to get up at night. At any rate, Angela asked her sister to go along with her to the only convenience they knew of in the convent, the one they were accustomed to visit just before going to bed."

"It was on the ground floor, I take it," said Dame Beatrice.

"It is near the door which opens on to the kitchen garden," said the prioress, "and I believe Miss Lipscombe took exception to their using it. This was most unreasonable, since during the day they did as they had been instructed and used the school facilities. It was only first thing in the morning and last thing before bed that they were permitted the use of the lavatory in question."

“Be that as it may, and I’m sure you showed them every consideration, Sister,” said Cartwright, “but, anyway, down the stairs they crept . . .”

“In the dark?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“Oh, no, not entirely in the dark,” explained Sister St. Elmo. “We keep a low-powered bulb alight on the staircases—there are two—because we once had a Sister who walked in her sleep.”

“If she was asleep when she walked, how would a light make her any safer?” asked Cartwright. “Oh, well, never mind. There may be some psychological explanation. However, my two crept down the stairs and made for the lavatory.”

“The door is down a very short passage,” put in Sister St. Elmo, “near the foot of the stairs.”

“Just so. It is necessary to understand that, in view of my story. The girls entered the passage and, while Angela was inside, her sister waited by the door. When Angela came out, Cecilia went in, having forbidden her sister to pull the chain for fear of waking the elderly ladies who, of course, were sleeping on the ground floor. When she came out, Angela told her she could hear somebody moving about. They spoke in whispers and then Cecilia peeped round the end of the little corridor to find out when the coast would be clear, for (she told us) they did not want to run into Miss Lipscombe who they knew resented their presence in the convent.

“Angela whispered, ‘Suppose she wants to come here?’ So they edged their way out, and that brings me to the part of Cecilia’s story which I find hard to accept, but which she is convinced is a fact. She declares that it was not Miss Lipscombe or the other old lady whom they saw in the cloister, but a man carrying a lantern and another man who seemed to be carrying something bulkier. She declares that the lantern lit up the legs of their trousers. They were

walking away from the children, so the two girls slipped away to the staircase and were soon back in bed."

"And neither mentioned the episode to anybody?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"Apparently they thought nothing of it. They supposed that the men were about some authorised task and, of course, they had no idea what time of night it was."

"So they do not know which way the men came in or where they went? I see. And they did not make any guess at their identity, since all they saw were their trouser-legs by lantern light?"

"Of course no man had any authority to be in the convent," said Sister St. Elmo. "I wish they had mentioned the matter to me. I should have instituted enquiries at once, as I need not tell you. Apparently, however, they thought no more of the matter until Cecilia heard of Miss Lipscombe's death."

"Miss Lipscombe's death," repeated Dame Beatrice thoughtfully. "But why should the discovery of her body in a pond tie up, in Cecilia's mind, with men in the cloister at night?"

"I have no idea, but she seems to have brooded over the matter ever since she knew of the death and then (very sensibly, in my opinion) decided to confide in Father MacNicol outside the Confessional. She wondered whether the two men had desecrated the chapel and Miss Lipscombe knew of it."

"And he, equally sensibly, referred the matter to you. I wonder whether you would allow me to talk with your daughter?"

"Do so, by all means," said the tall father, "but I make one stipulation, Dame Beatrice. It must be at her home, not here."

"Oh, I agree. We do not want any association of ideas beyond what is absolutely necessary."

"Then we will expect you"—he produced a visiting card—"at some time tomorrow, Dame Beatrice. Perhaps you would care to come to tea. We have it at four on Sundays because of the six-thirty Mass. I could pick you up here at three-thirty, if you would like a lift."

"No, I think not, thank you, because that would mean somebody would have to bring me home. I have my car here and my man will find your house." She tucked the visiting-card away and Cartwright took his leave.

"What extra information do you expect to obtain from those children?" asked the prioress when he had gone.

"None. I wish to confirm my impression of what their father has told us."

"What do you make of it so far?"

"Nothing at all. I wonder what those men were after, that they invaded the convent that night? *Did* they enter the chapel?"

"If they did, they disturbed nothing, neither was anything missing."

"Strange. Tell me about the very first letter you received."

"The very first? Oh!" The prioress looked startled. "I had completely overlooked the very first one," she confessed. "It was quite unrelated to any of the others, in a way."

"You intrigue me. This, then, is a letter that, so far, you have not mentioned."

"Yes, indeed it is, but I cannot see that it has any bearing on the later letters. It was on a different subject entirely and was even, perhaps, well meant."

"You have not kept it, I gather?"

"We kept none of the earliest ones."

"Please tell me about it. You mean it had nothing to do with the street accident to the child in the village?"

"Nor to Mrs. Wilks's having decided to leave us. It simply contained a warning that our woodwork shed was being used, possibly, for immoral purposes. Sister Hilary,

whose province it is, had a word with the woodwork master and with our factotum, Quince, and no more was said on the matter. Personally, I think the writer of that particular letter was mistaken in thinking that the shed was being used as a place of assignation. I think a tramp was using it as a shelter."

"I see. Did you think Miss Lipscombe wrote that letter as well as the others?"

"I did not trouble to think about it at all, but now that I know Mrs. Wilks used to break out of the convent after lock-up in order to go to the village to play bingo, I should not be surprised if she was the writer. She would have had to cross the playing field to get out of the grounds, you see, and could have seen a light in the shed, had there been one. She may even have approached the shed and peered in at a window."

"You do not think the woodwork master himself used the shed after hours to do some private work, I suppose?"

"It could well have been so. At any rate, we heard no more about it."

"I should like to inspect the shed."

"Tomorrow is Sunday, so it will not be in use. Would that suit you? Quince has a key and so has Sister Hilary. Do you attach importance, then, to the letter?"

"Well, it has its own interest."

"I am sorry it had so entirely slipped my mind."

"Can the shed be seen from Quince's cottage?"

"Yes, but not whether there is a light on at night, because the windows of the shed face away from Quince's. Still, I believe that since the school was broken into he patrols the grounds after dark. He is a most faithful fellow and has our interests very much at heart."

The following day was Dame Beatrice's first Sunday at the convent and the routine differed in various respects from

that followed on the other days of the week, including Saturdays. Venturing at Saturday supper to enquire of Mrs. Polkinghorne what the procedure was likely to be on the morrow—"I am not a Catholic, you see, and I should not wish to outrage the conventions in any way"—she received a comprehensive reply.

"For you, because you are *hereje* . . ."

"No, I am not a heretic. I am *agnóstica*."

"Worse!" stated Mrs. Polkinghorne concisely. "*Hereje*, at least he have a religion. *Agnóstica*, she sit on the wall, no?"

"Fence."

"So. Wall is more comfortable, I think."

"But, about the way we are expected to spend Sunday . . ."

"You will do as you please. No rules here for visitors. The *religiosas* they rise early, chapel at half seven, then breakfast. Morning prayers and pious readings at nine, then they do what they like until noon hour, when prayers. Eat at twelve-thirty, all of them, no excuses, very *ceremonioso*, you understand."

"Very formal, yes."

"One o'clock until two, they amuse themselves."

"Dear me!"

"I say something wrong?"

"Not if you mean that it is their hour of recreation."

"So. They embroider, sew, read, make conversation."

"Ah, yes, I understand. And what do *you* do all this time?"

"Breakfast with you at eight, then I do like the nuns, but lunch with you, not with them. Then devotional reading, walk in the garden, write to my son, who is *sacerdote* in South America—you understand?—and my daughter, who is *religiosa* in Bath."

"That all seems quite straightforward."

"So. Tea at four o'clock, the Sisters; also you and me. To prayers in the chapel at five-thirty. I go, too. Then comes the

evening. It is the custom for the Sisters to go to *la misa* in town church. The car takes four and good parents come with cars and take the others, also me and, when they are here, Mrs. Wilks and Miss Lipscombe. Quince, he go on the bus. The same returning."

"So the convent is completely empty for how long?"

"Perhaps two hours."

"I see. And then?"

"We come back, same like we go. Cold supper, then amuse from eight to nine. Night prayers after, then bedtime, and so another Sunday is over." She crossed herself devoutly.

Armed with this information, Dame Beatrice planned her day. At ten in the morning she walked over to Tom Quince's cottage and obtained the key to the woodwork shed.

CHAPTER 16

The Contents of a Cellar

“. . . and with this the cabinet communicated separately by a second flight of stairs. There were besides a few dark closets and a spacious cellar . . . The cellar . . . was filled with crazy lumber.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

“Key to the woodwork shed, ma’am?” said Tom Quince. “Sure I’ve got a key, but there’s nothing to see in there except the benches and tools and that.” They walked over the field towards it.

“It seems a long way from the main building,” Dame Beatrice remarked. “Have you ever thought that, out of school hours, it has been used for improper purposes?”

“Depends what you mean by that, ma’am. Mr. Chassett used to come here to do private jobs, and I don’t know if he had permission.”

“Did he come after dark?”

“Oh, no, ma’am, not so far as I’m aware. There ain’t no kind of light, you see, ’cepting what comes in at the winders. You couldn’t do *his* kind of work after dark.”

“So if, at any time after dark, anyone saw a light in here, it could only be an electric torch or a lantern, I suppose?”

“That’s right.”

"You did not report to the headmistress that Mr. Chassett made use of the shed after school hours?"

"Never crossed my mind, ma'am. It was his workroom, so I reckoned he'd a right to the use of it."

"And to the tools?"

"For all I know, he bringed his own. It were no business of mine. One thing he did used to bring with him, though, and that was his young lady."

"Oh, really?"

"Kind of plumber's mate, he told me she was. Handed him the tools and held things when he wanted a bit of help, but I wouldn't like to swear that was all there was to it, not with a young feller and a girl all on their lonesome, like, in the middle of a big field."

"I see. How do you come to know anything about it?"

"I run into them one summer evening. About six o'clock it was. I was walking back after taking the convent car to the garridge on account of Sister telling me she was knocking and I see them crossing the field, so I ketches up with them and I says, 'Something you left behind, sir?' He says no and tells me about a private job and hands me this dope about the young lady helping him and then he takes me aside and says, 'Have a heart, Quince. It's the only chance we has,' he says. 'I can't take her home to help me in my workshop there,' he says, 'on account of her being a Methody. My mam would never stand for it,' he says. Well, it seemed a shame for me to bung a brick at 'em, as you might say, me being soft-hearted that way, so until we has that turn-up at the school, and books and papers chucked all over the shop, I keeps out of their way and I never sees the young lady again 'cos I takes care as I doesn't. But once I starts patrolling the place, as ordered, I tips Mr. Chassett the wink. 'It's all right about *you*, sir,' I says to him, 'but I has my orders and the young lady comes under the heading,' I says, 'of interlopers on the premises.'"

"And what response did he make to that?"

"He looks at me a bit old-fashioned, but he says all right, if that's the way it's got to be, and he supposes he'll have to take the young lady to the pictures in Bristington to keep her pacified, like."

"And is his mother such a dragon?"

"I couldn't say. She used to teach in the school here once upon a time. We was a boarding school then and the teachers, they lived in."

"At the convent?"

"That's right. Of course, it was all them years ago and I was only gardener's boy at the time. Mind you, I *have* heard it said as it was only because of his mam that Mr. Chasset was give a job here. His dad done time, you see."

"Dear me!"

"IRA, ma'am, and up to all the tricks. You know, bombs and that. Over here, too, which I have always said they should keep their troubles at home and stay where they belong. Anyway, he got pinched in Liverpool—Liverpool Irish, I reckon he was—and broke his neck jumping the nick."

"Chasset isn't an Irish name, is it?"

"No, ma'am, I don't think it is. It wasn't the father's name, neither. Him and his mother changed to her maiden name when the old man was killed."

"Oh, I see," said Dame Beatrice, as though this was news. They inspected the shed. It told Dame Beatrice nothing, but she had a feeling that Tom Quince had told her a good deal.

There remained the Cartwright children, but she hoped for little, if anything, from Cecilia or her small sister. However, she presented herself at their home—a detached, imposing residence in the most aristocratic section of Bristington—at the appointed time, met the children's mother, and was told that her husband was playing golf and would not be home for tea.

"We have it early on Sundays because of Mass," Mrs. Cartwright explained. Dame Beatrice understood the significance of this. At least an hour must elapse between taking ordinary food and receiving the sacred wafer.

"Of course," she said, nodding. "At what time do you set off for church?"

"My husband will pick us up in the car at six, so there is plenty of time." She inclined her head towards the two little girls. "Do I sit in?"

"As you wish."

"Oh, well, then, perhaps I should hear what is said."

So, when tea was over and Mrs. Cartwright was seated apart pretending to read, Dame Beatrice began her catechism.

"The police," she said, "are on the track of a couple of wanted men and need your help. So far as we know, you are the only people who have seen them."

"Are *you* the police?" asked Cecilia.

"Home Office," said Dame Beatrice impressively. She lowered her beautiful voice, but not sufficiently to render Mrs. Cartwright out of earshot. "They are international criminals, we think, so the Home Office has to be brought in. It may mean extradition, you see."

"Will they be sent to Devil's Island?"

"It depends upon their nationality. It could be Devil's Island; it could be Sing Sing; it could be Dartmoor. Wherever it is, there will be top security, you may be certain of that."

"We didn't really see them, you know."

"Were they tall or short, would you say?"

"They were sort of creeping along, so I wouldn't really know how big they were and, besides, the lantern made ugly shadows on the wall."

"Did either of them remind you of anyone you had ever seen before?"

Cecilia shook her head.

"As soon as I saw them we went upstairs," she said. "It wasn't really because of the men. It was because we heard Miss Lipscombe's door creak and we didn't want her to know we'd been using her lavatory."

"Would you say that the men were actually searching the cloister?"

"As if they'd lost something, do you mean? No, it wasn't like that. It was more as if—as if—I don't know how to explain it."

"And you don't know whether Miss Lipscombe actually came out of her room?"

"Well," said the child judicially, "we didn't hear her pull the chain."

"But you didn't pull it yourselves, did you?"

"Only because we didn't want to wake people up."

"Well, she might have had the same humane reason. So you don't know whether she did come out of her room?"

"I think she'd have screamed if she'd seen the men."

"An excellent and most telling point; unless, of course, she knew they were going to be there."

"I don't think she would have gone to the lavatory with men about, even if she *did* know them. She was ever so old-fashioned and peculiar. She told us we ought not to wear tee shirts and our shorts. She said it was a temptation to Quince, so we asked Quince and he said *he* should worry, and to ask the old pussy if she knew any good limericks, but, of course, we didn't do anything of the sort."

"Well, now we come to the crux of the matter. What made you decide to confide in Father MacNicol? What suddenly frightened you about all this?"

"It was Miss Lipscombe getting drowned."

"But that was just an accident. It could have happened to anybody."

"Yes, I s'pose it could," said Cecilia doubtfully.

"Why are you unconvinced, I wonder?"

"*Please* don't press them, Dame Beatrice," said Mrs. Cartwright, looking up from her book.

"It's all right, mummy," said Cecilia. "I *want* her to know."

"Suppose I guess?" suggested Dame Beatrice.

"No. You might not guess right. I'll tell you. I heard Miss Lipscombe's door creak and, if it creaked, it meant she opened it and, *if* she opened it, she might have seen the men. Then she got drowned and I thought—well, I thought that if the men knew we'd seen them, too—even if it *was* only the back of them, *we* might get drowned. So I thought about it and I thought about it, and then I began to have bad dreams because I thought perhaps it was *our* fault Miss Lipscombe got drowned and if we hadn't been there she might not have come out of her room, because she might have come out because she heard us and we might be to blame because the men drowned her." Cecilia drew breath. "So that's why," she concluded. Dame Beatrice nodded solemnly several times.

"I appreciate your point of view," she said gravely. "Did you tell any other girls about all this?"

"Oh, yes, when school term started, but that was because we hadn't any suspicions then. It was just for a giggle about Miss Lipscombe. I'm sorry I said silly things about her, now she's dead."

"Death doesn't make that sort of difference," said Dame Beatrice. "You couldn't have known she was going to die so soon, when you said the silly things. I expect the other girls laughed and told other girls, didn't they?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure they did. We didn't mean to be unkind, though, not really."

"Of course you didn't. Besides, there is safety in numbers."

"What do you mean?"

"That there is nothing left for you to worry about, so long as so many others know what *you* know."

"That's what Father MacNicol says."

As George pulled up outside the convent on the return journey from the Cartwright's house, he said, "I think that's Mrs. Gavin's car, madam."

"Dear me," said Dame Beatrice, "so it is. I wonder whether she has had her tea?"

"I'm sure she has, madam."

"True. One lion may, when many asses do," Dame Beatrice amiably responded. She greeted her secretary affectionately but with a query in her voice.

"Just thought I'd look you up," said Laura airily. "Hope you don't mind."

"Sister Mary Hilary will be glad to see you."

"So this is where she hangs out nowadays." Laura squinted up at the barrack-like building. "Is she likely to be within hailing distance?"

Dame Beatrice looked at her wristwatch, then produced her notebook.

"Not at the moment," she said, consulting it. The Community will be in the chapel until six and after that they go off to Mass at the parish church in Bristington, the town you came through to get here. Your first chance to see her will be at eight o'clock, when the nuns are at recreation. But what really brings you here?"

"Anybody would think you weren't pleased to see me. As a matter of fact, I read about that old woman's death. There was just a tucked-away paragraph in the paper and then you mentioned it in your letter, so I had a hunch that it concerned Sister Hilary's telephone call putting you off. I had a feeling that you might be getting into mischief over it, so I thought I'd better come along. What on earth was the woman doing to go tumbling into ponds after dark?"

"She didn't tumble, child. There is a great deal yet that I don't know, but I'm certain, all the same, that she was

murdered.”

“Did you see the body?”

“No. I have no official connection with the case and am prepared to accept the medical evidence that the cause of death was drowning. Have you been here long?”

“Only about a quarter of an hour. A man who seemed to belong to the place came up as soon as I’d parked, so I asked after you and he said you had gone out. I didn’t know how convents functioned on Sundays, so I said I’d wait.”

“That would have been Tom Quince, an excellent fellow. Well, let us go inside and I will bring you up to date with all the news. I have just come from the home of one of the children.” She took Laura in and preceded her up the narrow staircase to the priest-room, where she gave her a brief but sufficient account of all that had been happening.

“And you think this kid’s evidence is valuable, do you?”

“I cannot say until I have tested it.”

“And when do we do that?”

“This evening. I have ascertained that for a space of about two hours, while the whole convent goes to Mass in the town, the coast will be clear and we can explore the ground floor of the building and find out, if we are fortunate, what the men with the lantern were looking for.”

“Have you any idea what it was?”

“None at all.” Dame Beatrice looked again at her watch. “I have put George and my car at the disposal of the nuns,” she went on, “and no doubt he will offer Quince the seat beside him. Place yourself at the window, like Sister Anne, and tell me when the cavalcade has moved off. One or two more cars will be coming along, I understand, and you have to check on eleven nuns.”

“Easily distinguishable to the naked eye, I suppose. Right! This is rather fun. I had no idea I’d be lucky enough to drop in for a spot of hunt-the-slipper as soon as I arrived.” From her post at the window Laura was soon able to begin

her report. "Very old nun escorted by a heavily built but not fat one and another who seems to be doing a lot of talking."

"Old Sister Ignatius, escorted by Sister St. Elmo and Sister Marcellus."

"One who walks like a princess, yes, and now I get a glimpse of her face, looks like one, too. Golly! What's she doing in a convent? And there's a younger one with a visage like a full moon walking with her."

"Sister Mary Romuald and Sister Mary Raymund."

"A tallish, tense sort of one walking beside a fat, jolly, Friar Tuck kind of individual."

"Sister Mary Leo and Sister Mary Honorius."

"They look ill assorted."

"No, they are complementary."

"Ah, surely one of the next couple is Miss Brownrigg?—I should say Sister Mary Hilary. I'd know that commanding presence anywhere. There's a slightly jaundiced-looking nun with her . . ."

"Sister Mary Wolstan, the secretary."

"Last in the procession—do they always form a crocodile when they go out, or is this just a matter of Church Parade—one who's smiling and has got her headgear on crooked. She's with a little old sourpuss who looks as though for two pins she could spit out of the side of her mouth."

"Sister Mary Fabian and Sister Mary Elphege."

"Now an old woman wearing a black mantilla—Mrs. Polkinghorne, I think you told me—and that's the lot. The first three are getting into the back seat of your car; George is helping, and here comes the bloke Quince. One or two more cars have rolled up. The Helen of Troy nun is in the driver's seat of the ancient vehicle which was here when I arrived and her stable-companion and two others are piling in. The rest are being shepherded into the other cars, I think. Now everybody is accommodated, and off we go."

"Off we go, too," said Dame Beatrice. "Two hours, the most we can hope for, may be none too long for our

business." They left the comfortable priest-room and Dame Beatrice led the way down the stairs. At the foot of the short flight she halted. "It was from about this point that the child saw the two men," she said. "They were walking away from her, so let us follow in their footsteps."

The cloister was stone flagged. The downstairs rooms opened out of it on one side; on the other the brickwork was relieved at intervals by round-headed windows that gave what light there was, and beyond them was a small square of grass on which some neat swellings, each with its wooden headstone, indicated the graves of former inmates.

"Shouldn't care to be wandering round here in the dark," said the superstitious Laura, glancing out of one of the windows as she passed it.

"Miss Lipscombe's old room," said Dame Beatrice, indicating a door. "Mrs. Wilks's old room, which has a window exit. It may be just as well, incidentally, that those children did not descend the stairs a little earlier."

"Why?"

"Because, from the account Cecilia gave me, it seems as though the men explored first the part of the cloister that we have already traversed. I wonder why they decided to come this way? It is just as easy to continue in the other direction if one wishes to circumnavigate the cloister."

"Something to do with widdershins, perhaps," suggested Laura.

They crossed over the passage that led to the front door and reached the room belonging to old Sister Ignatius. Beyond this, the cloister turned at right angles. At the end of this next passage was the chapel, but as they reached the foot of the chapel stairs Dame Beatrice produced a small electric torch and shone it on the walls. Under the staircase there was a small, round-headed door. Laura examined the padlock that secured it.

"Newish," she said. "Do I pick it? Nice goings-on for a quiet Sunday evening, I must say."

"Love laughs at locksmiths and so do burglars," said Dame Beatrice, as her secretary produced a small tool given her as a souvenir by her policeman husband and which (she said) she always carried in her handbag as a token of his affection.

"Been well-oiled," said Laura, referring to the lock. She prised it open, pulled at the door and Dame Beatrice's torch disclosed a flight of steps. "Cellars. Of course this place is built on a hill." Lighted by the torch, they descended into the cellars. These proved to be vast. "Must run under most of the house. Sub-divided, like the rooms above. Which way shall we go?"

"This way, I think, under the chapel. The cellars will only be beneath the building itself, and not under the cloister garth, since that is a graveyard. The only object of any value the convent possesses is a picture in the refectory; although, unless there is a stair up to the refectory from these cellars . . ."

"Eh, eh!" said Laura suddenly. "What have we here? Doesn't look much like junk."

"No. It merely makes other people's property look like junk," said Dame Beatrice, staring at the impressive contents of Aladdin's cave.

"I think," said Dame Beatrice, five minutes later, "that we had better telephone the police. While there are many chemical compounds with which I am not familiar, those which we discovered just now can hardly have been stored in that cellar by the nuns; nor do I think that the nuns oiled that padlock on the door."

"Where is the nearest telephone?"

"In the prioress's room, a sanctum I do not feel I ought to enter without permission. There is another over at the school in the secretary's office, but while Quince is at Mass we cannot use that one either. It will have to be the public

telephone outside the village post office. How fortunate that we have your car at our disposal."

They drove off in it. The inspector was at home, off duty, but the station sergeant put Dame Beatrice's message through to him. She and Laura drove back to the convent and there, in less time than they would have supposed possible, he joined them.

"You didn't give anything away to the sergeant, ma'am," he said, "just that you needed me urgently."

"I thought it better not to voice my suspicions over the telephone, Inspector."

"What are they, ma'am?"

"I hesitate to say, in case I am wildly out in my surmises."

"Something to do with Miss Lipscombe's death, do you think?"

"If I am right, it could be everything to do with her death. It could also explain the translation of Mrs. Wilks to another and a more comfortable environment."

"You have me fogged," said the inspector good-humouredly, his solemn visage brightening into a smile. "Hadn't you better come clean?"

"No, I must leave you to judge for yourself."

She led him to the door of the cellar and lit the way down the steps.

"Well," he said, when he had inspected Laura's discovery, "I shall have to get the Special Branch on to this, but I haven't much doubt that this is a pretty formidable collection of explosives, ma'am. That's what you made of it, isn't it? Well, I'm not going to lay a finger on the stuff and I trust you and Mrs. Gavin didn't touch it, either. Not that fingerprints will be any use to us unless one of the fellows has a record, and in this kind of business that's unlikely. Is there a telephone in the house?"

Untroubled by the scruples previously expressed by Dame Beatrice, he entered the prioress's office, which was

unlocked, and was on the telephone for some time. When he emerged he said, "Not a word to the nuns or anyone else, ma'am, if you please. Special Branch are sending their men at once. A watch is to be kept. They hope, if we're right in thinking the cellar is being used as an ammunition dump, to catch the fellows red-handed. But what did you mean about the two old ladies, ma'am?"

"From a story I shall recount to you, Inspector, and which was told me by one of the children who spent a fortnight of the summer holiday here, I think Miss Lipscombe may have seen at least one of the persons concerned when he passed her bedroom door on his way to the cellar."

"Mean she might even have recognised him, ma'am?"

"That I cannot say, but I think there is little doubt but that he feared she would remember him if ever she saw him again."

"And Mrs. Wilks? Anything to do with her leaving the convent the sudden way she seems to have done?"

"She may know one of the men—in fact, I am sure she does—but not in this particular connection. I think she was invited to leave the convent so that the conspirators—one of whom must have known that the bars on her window were removable—could obtain access to the cellar without serious risk of detection. If they had been content to leave their entrances and exits to Sunday evenings during the time of Mass, the chances are that Miss Lipscombe would never have seen them. The trouble was that, having obtained their material (probably in small quantities) they had to store it in a safe place until they could dispose of it, and I suppose they knew of nowhere else to keep it, so it had to be put away as and when it came into their hands."

CHAPTER 17

Re-Enter Mrs. Wilks

"Friends, blame me not! A narrow ken
Hath childhood 'twixt the sun and sward;
We draw the moral afterward—
We feel the gladness then."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"Could you enlarge on that, ma'am?—explain your theories, as it were? If you're right, how come that Mrs. Wilks is under no suspicion and could even go to an inquest and give evidence, whereas the other old party was murdered?"

"I would prefer to leave my explanations until I have interviewed Mrs. Wilks and one or two others. If the interviews turn out as I believe they will, I shall make a full report."

"Very good, ma'am. You won't go sticking your neck out, though, will you? Now that we know what's going on, we can reckon we're dealing with people who won't stop at much."

"If at anything. I shall take every precaution, Inspector, you may be sure."

"And Mrs. Gavin, ma'am? She strikes me as a lady who thinks 'precautions' is a dirty word."

"You have summed her up. I am sending her home on the excuse that there is nowhere here for her to sleep."

Faced with an ultimatum, Laura began by showing fight, but Dame Beatrice, urbane to the last, overruled her and she departed to spend the night at an hotel in Tewkesbury before returning to the Stone House, Dame Beatrice's home on the edge of the New Forest.

Dame Beatrice had supper—always a cold meal on Sundays at the convent—with Mrs. Polkinghorne, whose first remark was, “You did not go to Mass.”

“No. I am not a Catholic.”

“Not an excuse valid, I think. You could not receive the sacrament, but you could attend at the church.”

“That is very true.”

“Insult to the prioress not to go.”

“I had not thought of that. If you were staying with a Protestant family, you would attend Church of England evensong, then, in order to please your host?”

Mrs. Polkinghorne looked dubious and then shook her silver-streaked black-haired head.

“Not the same thing,” she stated decidedly. “Is one true Church.”

“Refuse all worthless imitations, you think? Tell me, Mrs. Polkinghorne—”

“I like you should call me Maria. I am named Maria Pilar Mercedes. Maria Mercedes is by my parents and Pilar I take at my first Communion.”

“Very well, Maria. My own baptismal names are Beatrice Adela.”

“Nice names. I call you Adela. What are you wanting me to tell you?”

“Which, if any, of the nuns, was Mrs. Wilks most fond of when she was here? Had she a special favourite?”

“Oh, I think yes. I think she like Sister Elphege and Sister Leo. Most like herself. Sad.”

“That coincides with an opinion I had formed.”

“Yes? But why? How should you know?”

“Because of those letters.”

Mrs. Polkinghorne's brow darkened.

"Bad, those letters."

"Very bad. Unkind. Untrue. And so far as the nuns were concerned—can you keep a secret?"

"But certainly. Is not my son *sacerdote*? Is not my daughter *religiosa*?"

Dame Beatrice could not see that this was any sort of reassurance, but she accepted it as such and went on, "All the letters but three, possibly four, were written by the same person."

"That Miss Lipscombe, who is now in purgatory to be cleansed of her sins. Why three?"

"Because the parents of the child who was knocked down by the convent car have confessed to writing two of them, a third was written by Miss Lipscombe's murderer, and a fourth letter is of doubtful authorship and, in any case, may be disregarded."

"But your secret?"

"You know that all the nuns except Sister Ignatius and Sister Marcellus received letters? Well, the most hurtful letters, because the information in them could be neither proved nor disproved, were sent to Sisters Leo and Elphege."

"What did they say?"

"Things I shall not repeat, even to you, Maria."

"Then where is the secret?"

"That two of the nuns received such scurrilous and unfair accusations."

"Sister Elphege told us she had parents of the Resistance. They died in concentration camps after bad treatment. That is why she is not pleasant no more."

"Then the letter she received *must* have been hurtful."

"The letter accuse them of being *en colaboración* with the Germans?"

"You have guessed it. I deduced, therefore, that Miss Lipscombe had singled out Mrs. Wilks's favourites among

the nuns for her particular and special spite simply because she hated Mrs. Wilks."

"That march with my thoughts. It is a way of saying by her about the big horse."

"The big horse? Oh, yes, I see what you mean. '*Caballo grande, ande o no ande.*' You have some fine proverbs in your language."

"*Si.* So what are you wanting with Sister Leo and Sister Elphege?"

"I want to persuade one of them to invite Mrs. Wilks to the convent. I take it that the nuns may have visitors?"

"Ask Sister Elphege. She is not happy, that one, like I say. She will be pleased you ask her to do something for you."

"Good. And the secret, I know, is safe with you."

"I lay it upon my soul," said Mrs. Polkinghorne, crossing herself, "although not much of a secret, do you think?"

"It is nearly eight o'clock," said Dame Beatrice. "I will lurk outside the Community Room and waylay Sister Elphege as she goes there for Recreation."

"And am I to wait upon Mrs. Wilks?" grumbled Sister Marcellus, "as well as fulfilling all my other duties? Ah, well, no doubt I shall be adding to my credit in heaven."

"Either, that, or I will get tea for Mrs. Wilks and myself," said Dame Beatrice equably. "We shall have it together and with Mrs. Polkinghorne, no doubt; and I am quite capable of cutting bread and butter and putting on a plate the small cakes so excellently made by Sister Elphege, whose guest Mrs. Wilks will be."

Tactfully approached by Dame Beatrice after school Assembly on the following morning, Sister Hilary made no difficulty about freeing Sister Elphege from her afternoon duties so that Dame Beatrice's chauffeur could drive her into Bristington to the address supplied by Sister St. Elmo. They came back to the convent at half past three and Mrs. Polkinghorne, displaying the customary courtesy of the

Spaniard, left the two of them alone in the parlour, as did Dame Beatrice, who then found Mrs. Polkinghorne traipsing forlornly round the autumnal convent garden.

“Dear me, Maria,” she said, “you must come indoors. It is far too chilly for you out here.”

“Where to go?” sighed Mrs. Polkinghorne. “My room, I sicken myself of her”—(*Alcoba*, Dame Beatrice remembered, is a feminine noun)—“and I do not intrude upon Sister Elphege and her guest, although much I like to speak with Mrs. Wilks.”

“You will be able to do so at teatime. Come up to my room if you are tired of your own, and we will pass half an hour in cosy chat.”

Mrs. Wilks, at teatime, surprised them both. She declared, almost with passion, that she wished she had never left the convent and that, if Sister St. Elmo would take her back, nothing should stand in the way of her return.

“They are not good to you, these relatives?” asked Mrs. Polkinghorne, amazed. “But they are your family. It is right you live with them. In Espania we all live together—*abuelo, abuela, el padre, la madre, los niños*, yes, also *tío, tía—los todos*, all the damn lot. If I never come to England, I live with them, too.”

“I was tempted,” said Mrs. Wilks, “by the big car which came to fetch me and by the expensive clothes my nephew was wearing, but I don’t believe he *is* my nephew. To the best of my knowledge I have only one niece and this man is not her husband, neither do he and his wife allow me to write to her. I am not allowed to write any letters at all. I don’t know why they let me come here today. They often have visitors, but I am never invited to meet them. Ever since Lilian’s death I have wondered whether there was some reason for getting me out of the convent. I told them this morning that I wanted to come back here if Sister St. Elmo would have me and my nephew (I call him that, because that is what he claims to be) said that, if I felt that

way, the best thing would be for me to return, if only I would keep his wife company for another week while he has to be away from home on business. Oh, Dame Beatrice, *would* you speak to Sister for me? I hardly like to approach her myself after the cool way I walked out on her, though not owing her any money, you understand."

"This nephew of yours," said Dame Beatrice, "is he an Englishman?"

"No, he is Irish, I think, though he hasn't much of an Irish accent. I was a Miss McCann, you know, before I married, but I was born and brought up over here, so I *might* have Irish relatives of whom I know nothing."

"And he treat you well?" Mrs. Polkinghorne enquired for the second time.

"Oh, as to that, I can't complain. I have a very comfortable room and the food is good, but I never go out alone. His wife always goes with me to the shops and to the pictures. Not that I mind. It's nice to have company and she is a good-tempered woman, not in the least like poor Lilian, who was always quarrelling and finding fault."

"They made no objection to your attending the inquest and giving evidence, I suppose?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Far from it. My nephew said it was my duty to go along and tell what I knew."

"With the result that Miss Lipscombe's death was treated as accidental."

Mrs. Wilks's prominent eyes widened.

"Don't you think it was accidental, then?" she enquired.

"The coroner's jury thought so, and it was for them to judge."

"Of course she can come back," said Sister St. Elmo. "If for no other reason, she will be company for Mrs. Polkinghorne, who will be desolated when you go. She tells me that you

are *sumamente que congenia*. But why this change of heart by Mrs. Wilks?"

"She seems to be a kind of prisoner in her nephew's house. Moreover, she does not believe that he *is* her nephew. She thinks there was some reason for getting her out of the convent in the first place and, of course, there is no doubt that she is right. Some persons wanted access to your cellars by means of her room with its removable window bars. I think we may expect developments shortly. Meanwhile I have taken matters into my own hands to a certain extent. Mrs. Wilks thinks that my chauffeur is taking her back to her so-called nephew's house, whereas in fact she is bound for my own home in Hampshire, with a police escort who will be responsible for her safety until this business is cleared up and over. I had reasons for bringing her here, and that is one of them."

"Good gracious me, Dame Beatrice! But what will happen when the nephew realises that Mrs. Wilks is not going to return?"

"That remains to be seen. At any rate, he can make no effective move tonight."

"But why have you sent her away? Was she in any danger from him?"

"That I am unable to say, but I decided that precautionary measures should be taken. Mrs. Wilks, like the unfortunate and foolish Miss Lipscombe, is probably curious and enquiring by nature, the more so as she senses that her present circumstances—I mean those that obtained before she was allowed to come here today—are, to say the least, suspicious and unusual. She seems to have been little other than a prisoner in that house, unable even to write letters and never allowed out alone. She must have realised, weeks ago, that something was wrong and that the 'nephew' had an ulterior motive in persuading her to leave the convent."

"I wonder she was permitted to give evidence at the inquest on Miss Lipscombe, then."

"Not at all. That evidence was most valuable to the murderer, since it helped to bring in a verdict of accidental death. She may have been primed beforehand."

"I see. You say that she has not been allowed out alone while she has been staying with these people. Why, then, did they let her come here to visit us?"

"I imagine they realised she was becoming suspicious; so when Sister Elphege's invitation arrived it must have seemed better to them to allow her to accept it."

"I am surprised that we were allowed to know her address if they are engaged upon the wicked work you have specified."

"There are two answers to that. It would have aroused your own suspicions, would it not, if she had refused to tell you where she was going when she left the convent? After all, she did not leave under a cloud or as the result of a disagreement with the Sisters or yourself. Also, we would do well to remember that when Mrs. Wilks left this house there could have been no intention to kill Miss Lipscombe. The conspirators' only object at that time, I am perfectly certain, was to obtain access to your cellars by way of that very convenient window in the room which Mrs. Wilks occupied."

"Yes, I see, but they must also have agreed that she should ask to return here and take up residence with us again. Was that also to allay her suspicions?"

"Partly, I suppose, but also, I think, because, once their work was over and they had cleared your cellars of the detonators and other material they have stored there ready for shipment, it was to their advantage to rid themselves of her. There would be no point in keeping her any longer."

"But supposing they had needed to use our cellars again? You see, Dame Beatrice, had it not been for you, we should never have suspected that anybody was storing all this dreadful stuff in the convent."

"For that you have to thank chiefly the two Cartwright children."

"Oh, no! It was you who suspected that poor Miss Lipscombe had been murdered."

"If the activities in the cellar had continued after the present consignment of explosives had been sent away, I think the next occupant of Mrs. Wilks's room might have met the same fate as Miss Lipscombe," went on Dame Beatrice. "Once murder has been committed, there is little to deter the murderer from repeating himself if the need arises."

"How horrible it all is!"

"Yes, indeed."

"When all this is cleared up, I shall have our cellars sealed off and shall see that the fact is widely publicised. That will be the best plan, don't you think?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I have been wondering how anybody outside our own ranks could have known of the existence of the cellars. Have you any theories about that?"

"I have two and both are viable. One is that any house, particularly one of any size, that is built on the slope of a hill, is almost bound to have cellars."

"And the other?" asked the prioress, looking anxiously and enquiringly at Dame Beatrice.

"The other is that you have somewhere among your company a traitor or perhaps I should say, in the language of our time, a double agent."

"You do not—you cannot—suspect one of our Sisters!"

"Several of them are Irishwomen," said Dame Beatrice, with an eldritch cackle that hardly suggested mirth.

"Ah, you are teasing me," said the prioress with relief. "That leaves the servants, but I am sure they are to be trusted and as for Tom Quince, I would as soon suspect myself as that excellent fellow."

Dame Beatrice forebore to point out that there were others besides the nuns and the servants who were connected to some extent with the convent, but she saw

that the thought had already occurred to Sister St. Elmo, who then said, "No! I will not entertain the thought that the school harbours a criminal."

"There will be proof enough in time," said Dame Beatrice. "Meanwhile I hope you will listen to the suggestions of those who have the Sisters' welfare at heart and will carry out official orders. Some of these orders may occasion the Sisters some surprise and some inconvenience, but I think they had better be told to imitate the three wise monkeys."

"I will put them upon their obedience, but are you sure that they are not in actual danger?"

"I am sure of nothing, but I hope for the best."

"You have great faith."

"In the police? Yes, I have. I also believe that Miss Lipscombe's murderer will soon be brought to book, though it was nothing but her own foolish greed that caused her death."

"Do you mean that she actually knew the men who have been making such dangerous and wicked use of our cellars?"

"I am sure she knew one of them. Anyway, a close watch will be kept and we may expect a *dénouement* at any time now. It may come under cover of the night or—more likely, in my opinion—next Sunday afternoon when, as is your custom, the convent will be left empty."

"I am not easily alarmed, but the thought of living above a cellar containing a considerable quantity of high explosive causes me very great uneasiness."

"I know, but I think we must be guided by the police, and they have their plans fully prepared."

"I will pray for the safety of us all. One thing puzzles me greatly. Where does the explosive material come from? Have they robbed an arsenal?"

"Have you quarries in the neighbourhood?"

“Yes, there are the stone quarries at Plinth, about twenty miles away.”

“That, then, is the answer. Commercial high explosives and detonators are stored at quarries and these stores are often left unattended, a practice that ought to result in prosecution, but does not seem to. Usually the thieves are criminals in the legal sense of the word—safe-blowers, you know. Unfortunately it is not unknown for a quarry storekeeper to be bribed into falsifying his records so that the gradual leaking away of explosives goes unnoticed. Had there been no quarries in your neighbourhood, the police would have made enquiries about the blasting out of tree-roots on woodland estates. Another source of supply could be farmland. Nitrogenous fertilisers are in use on every farm in England.”

“Dear me! I had no idea that such dangerous materials were so readily available to the criminal classes.”

“It is also criminal that it should be so. There is police supervision over the Irish quarries, but nothing of the sort over here.”

“You think these explosives in our cellars are intended for export to Ireland?”

“Unless some subversive organisation has plans to use them over here. We are living during a reign of terror, I fear, Sister.”

“I shall not give way to it.”

“It is the work of a minority. Armageddon is not yet.”

CHAPTER 18

Farewell to the Nuns

“. . . they display the remarkable and confessedly surprising status of their citizenship. They live in countries of their own, but as sojourners. They share all things as citizens; they suffer all things as foreigners. Every foreign land is their native place, every native place is foreign . . . They pass their life on earth; but they are citizens in heaven.”

The Epistle to Diognetus

“Well!” said Sister Marcellus, setting down the tea tray on a table in the convent parlour. “Did ever you hear the like of that! If the blessed saints themselves would have been telling the truth of it, I would not have trusted my ears! Sure, it’s dreaming I am!”

“It’s Irish you are,” said Dame Beatrice. She gazed at the ex-lay sister in mingled admiration and surprise. “And to think I never suspected it until now!”

“English is the language of this country and English I’ll be speaking as the usual thing,” said Sister Marcellus with dignity, “but it is no secret that I had my education, such as it was, from the good Sisters in County Cork.”

“So what has surprised you into this lapse into a syntax which, I take it, is based upon a Gaidhelic dialect dating back to the days of your youth?”

"Policemen," replied Marcellus, reverting to the pronunciation and intonation she habitually employed. "Policemen using my kitchen. Policemen here, there, and everywhere. Policemen all over the house! I don't know what things are coming to, really I don't! And not a word to be breathed to anybody outside these walls! A policeman using Sister St. Elmo's office; yes, and her telephone, too. And another policeman in Sister Wolstan's room over at the school and he to be in charge of *her* telephone! It's as bad as the French Revolution, I declare it is!"

"Well, let us hope that the tumbrils won't begin rolling," said Dame Beatrice. "So Mrs. Wilks has left us again, has she?"

"She like better food than she get here," said Mrs. Polkinghorne, beginning to pour out tea. "All the same, I think she is not so very glad to go."

"The last I heard, she was begging Sister to keep her here," declared Marcellus. "I suppose Sister told her she did not want her back, and small blame if she did say so. What right had Mrs. Wilks to go flouncing off with a stranger after all we had done for her over the last seven years? Ingratitude is no name for it."

"I think she like the big car," said Mrs. Polkinghorne. "Miss Lipscombe," she added when Sister Marcellus had taken herself off, "write too many letters. I tell her so. And Sister Marcellus talk too many words."

"And did you tell her that?"

"Not so. She is *religiosa*, so I respect her. She is also *muy tonta*."

"She cannot help being very ignorant. She has not had your advantages."

"That is true. I am without charity, like San Pablo."

"You fail to do him justice."

"I go to good school in Madrid. There the *religiosas* are of two kinds. Some sing in choir; others sing in kitchen. You

understand? But here not so. Sister Marcellus, she do both. Not good, that, do you think?"

"I am not capable of expressing an opinion. I agree with you, though, that Miss Lipscombe, as I think you once told me, wrote at least one very dangerous letter

"So I think. She let cats out of bags and get scratched and die."

"Can you name the particular cat that caused her death?"

"No," replied Mrs. Polkinghorne sadly, "I cannot name that animal."

"I had not realised that Sister Marcellus was Irish until her indignation caused her to betray the fact. How many of the nuns are Irishwomen?"

"Who can say? *Inglés, escoces, irlandés*—to me all the same."

"No doubt to most English, Scots and Irish, all Catalans, Castilians, Galicians, Asturians, and Estramadurans are the same!"

"All *español* and no difference of religion. All good Catholics except a few who are Communist No troubles, no bombs, no strikes in the Spain I come from."

"Really? It sounds an ideal country. Did you ever talk to Miss Lipscombe about it?"

"That one? No. She go nowhere and she know nothing. To be a daughter to *el alcalde*, what is that? She come not of good people. All is pretending. She find out everybody's business and although she is frightened at night she do not lock her door for fear of fire and the lock stick when she want to get out. Also she has weakness in her *riñones*. You understand?"

"Her kidneys, yes?"

"So. And she visit *el escusado* in the middle of the night, pull chain, and wake everybody. Do you call that nice?"

"It is difficult to choose between waking people up and neglecting to flush the toilet, perhaps."

"Selfish," said Mrs. Polkinghorne flatly. "*Egoisto*. Besides, she do it to annoy Mrs. Wilks, who do not sleep so good if she wake up in the night with the chain pulled."

Dame Beatrice, who had had various not very-well-defined pictures in her mind of how Miss Lipscombe had come to her end, found her ideas suddenly clarified. There would have been the exit from the ground floor bedroom, the walk along the cloister to the lavatory, the meeting (totally unexpected by both of them) with an intruder, the subsequent anonymous letter—anonymous in the sense that it was unsigned, but bearing the full imprint of Miss Lipscombe's name because of its threatening contents, the payments as the price of Miss Lipscombe's silence, and the ultimate turning of the worm . . . "One letter too many? Yes, indeed," thought Dame Beatrice.

"Publish and be damned, for *my* motto," she said aloud. Mrs. Polkinghorne moved away from the tea table and took up her everlasting crochet work without attempting to question Wellington's famous dictum.

"What I don't understand, ma'am," said Inspector Cramond, "and what I wish you'd explain (supposing you have any theories about it, which something tells me you have) is how the murderer can have done what he did, supposing we're right about it being murder. That is, how on earth he managed to kill her without having to leave a mark of violence on her, ma'am. Even an old girl like that would have put up some sort of a struggle and some of these elderly ladies who've led abstemious lives and gone to church regular are surprisingly tough."

"That is very true, if they are awake and alert, but what if they are unconscious and therefore inert when they are put into the water? Once immersed, the victim could be held face downwards without any mark of violence being apparent."

"You mean they drugged her before they drowned her?"

"The Princes in the Tower need not have been drugged before they were done to death, Inspector."

"You mean he smothered her and *then* dumped her in the pond?"

"Believing that she was already dead, I fancy, but I suppose she began to revive. She would have been in the water by then, I think, and all he had to do was to hold her face down until she actually did die. She could not have stood the slightest chance. Yet neither assault—the original partial suffocation, possibly effected soundlessly with a pillow, and then the eventual drowning—need have resulted in marks of violence on the body."

"And where would he get a pillow? One of her own, do you think?"

"More likely it came from Mrs. Wilks's old room and he crept in, armed with it. I am told that she never locked her door for fear of fire. Suffocation with a pillow need not produce evidence of injury, or so the forensic journals inform us."

"She was in bed, then, and not down at the pond when she was murdered?"

"It is a tenable hypothesis, don't you think? In spite of Mrs. Wilks's evidence at the inquest, there has never been any proof that Miss Lipscombe went into the village to play bingo. That means she would have had no reason to pass by the pond at night."

"So that's how you figure it all out, ma'am? And what about the murderer?"

"She ran into him, I think, when he was on his way to the cellar. Access can be gained to the house, as we know, by way of Mrs. Wilks's old room, and the murderer knew all about that. On the occasion of their meeting, Miss Lipscombe must have left her room, as seems to have been her habit during the night, for a certain necessary purpose. She must have recognised the intruder by the light of the

lantern he was carrying. Possibly she shrank back against the shadowed wall of the cloister without challenging him, but later on I think she wrote him a letter and, although it was in print and unsigned, he soon knew from whom it came because Miss Lipscombe began extracting sums of money from him."

"So that's how she got it, not from bingo, but from blackmail, you think? And she knew the man. Sounds to me like this nephew of Mrs. Wilks, but we've no proof, have we?"

"No, not yet."

"Never mind. If he's mixed up in this cellar business, Special Branch will get him for that, all right. He and his mates, whoever they are, are bound to try and shift the stuff out while the convent is empty next Sunday evening, because they'll smell an almighty big rat when Mrs. Wilks doesn't return to this chap's house. The way I see it, they've brought the stuff to the cellar a bit at a time and probably the only chaps who've acted as porters are the two men the children spotted. Well, I reckon one of them is our man. On the other hand, they can't take the stuff *out* a bit at a time because, as I see it, they've nowhere safe to store it until it gets on board ship or in some other way to its destination. So they'll choose Sunday, put their whole gang on to the job, and clear the cellar while they think the coast is clear."

"I agree about that, Inspector, but I do not think our murderer will come on Sunday."

"Don't you, ma'am? Why don't you think he'll come?"

"Because he will be in church."

"In church? Asking a blessing on their enterprise?"

"You jest, Inspector, but I mean what I say. The murderer will be in church because there would be an uncomfortable amount of speculation about his whereabouts if he neglected to attend."

"His wife would wonder where he was, you mean?"

"I do not think he is married. He could feign illness, I suppose, but I do not think he will, neither do I think his companions would wish it. I do not think they trust him very far, but we shall see."

"Then you don't think he's Mrs. Wilks's nephew, as he calls himself?"

"I will tell you who he is and we shall apprehend him on his own confession."

On the following day Dame Beatrice moved in with the Fennells.

"The inspector wants the coast left entirely clear on Sunday," she explained, "and he thinks it will lead to less speculation if I move out of the convent in good time."

"Have you thought any more about that vile letter which was sent to me?" Fennell asked when his wife had gone off to superintend the preparation of the evening meal. "You indicated that you did not believe it came from Miss Lipscombe."

"Neither did it. I am certain that it came from her murderer."

"But why should he write in such offensive terms to me?"

"It was a long shot, of course, but I think he hoped that if, for any reason, suspicion of having caused Miss Lipscombe's death ever chanced to alight on him, the letter might divert that suspicion from him to you."

"Good Lord! Is he crazy?"

"No, but he is a weakling and a coward. Such people are very dangerous because they have no scruples when it is a case of saving their own skins at the expense of someone else's. He realised the feeling you had for your wife and thought that he might turn it to his advantage."

"Well, who *is* the fellow, anyway? It must be somebody I know."

"It was somebody who did not cut his vile words out of Miss Lipscombe's Family Bible, anyway. The print is quite

different, as I noticed.”

“A very nice clean-up, ma’am,” said the inspector, when he called at the Fennells’ house on the following Monday morning after Mrs. Fennell had left to go to the school. “We had plenty of reinforcements, but there were only four of them, two to work the cellar and two more to load up the van. We took them red-handed, just the way we wanted it, so you can go back to the convent as soon as you like. Chummy-boy, which is to say the man whose name you gave me, wasn’t with them, as you told me he wouldn’t be. So now, ma’am, how do we get this confession out of him?”

“I return to the attack, Mr. Chassett,” said Dame Beatrice to an obviously nervous and unhappy young man. “Are you still maintaining that you have never received one of those anonymous letters?”

Ronald Chassett moistened his lips.

“What does it matter now?” he asked feebly. “The old woman who wrote them is dead.”

“I feel that she is like Esther Reid, of whom I read in the far-off days of my childhood. She yet speaketh. Come, Mr. Chassett! If you did not receive one of those letters, perhaps you wrote one.”

“I don’t know what you mean. And I’d be glad if you would vacate this shed. I’m expecting a class in ten minutes’ time and I have to get things ready for them.”

“Ah, yes, this shed. The very first of the letters—not the one *you* wrote, of course, but an earlier one—referred to it, did it not?”

“I’ve no idea, but if that nosey old parker sent some filthy accusation about me to the Sisters, I can pretty well guess what it was.”

“Can you, indeed? I should be interested to hear what your conjectures are.”

“Well, if she snooped around here often enough, she probably saw a meeting or two between me and my fiancée.”

"Oh, I see."

"I couldn't always meet Marilyn at my home or hers, so occasionally we met here."

"But you no longer do so?"

"No. Sister Hilary told me about the letter and I got the impression that we were being spied on, so we dropped the shed as a meeting-place. Does that satisfy you?"

"I seek information, not satisfaction." She glanced round the shed and took in its benches, cupboards, and tool-racks. "As a place of assignation it must have had its disadvantages."

"We met only to talk over our plans for the future."

"Then why did you object to being spied on?"

Ronald Chasseti kicked the leg of one of the benches.

"People have such dirty minds," he said. "I didn't mind for myself, but I didn't like somebody tipping off Sister Hilary that Marilyn and I met here. Marilyn is sensitive. She might have heard criticism if somebody in the town began some ill natured gossip about us."

"After you gave this place up for that particular reason, did you ever meet anybody else here?"

"Oh, well"—he hesitated—"oh, well, now and again a few of us used to meet here for a quiet game of cards. There was no harm in it. We never played high. Now, look here, I don't want to be rude and turn you out of this hut, but my class will be on their way."

"I think not, Mr. Chasseti. I understand that Sister Hilary is keeping them over at the school so that you and I should not be interrupted. Did you know that the convent cellars were raided by the police last night and that four of your card-playing acquaintances were taken into custody? It seems that they were in the act of removing a fairly large quantity of detonators and explosive material from the cellar, which you had shown them and which you had declared to be safe."

Ronald Chasseti moistened his lips.

"And how am I supposed to have known about the cellar?" he demanded, in frightened, belligerent tones.

"Your mother was on the school staff when all the teachers lived in the convent."

Ronald Chassett opened his mouth, made an incoherent attempt at speech, gave it up, and glared at her. She resumed, "Miss Lipscombe saw you, didn't she? You offered her money—not a great deal, it is true—and she took it and promised not to give you away to Sister St. Elmo. She did not blackmail you to begin with except to make you get rid of a certain large and heavy book . . ."

"It's a lie! It's all lies!"

"It is not a lie that when you knew she was continuing to send out those anonymous letters, one of which came to you, you distrusted her sufficiently to kill her. You need not have done that, you know. She knew nothing about the explosives in the cellar, although she had begun asking you for more money."

"She snooped around," said Chassett, finding his voice. "We couldn't trust her."

"Good gracious!" said Dame Beatrice, with a leer that caused him to flinch. "You surprise me so much that I think I should like to sit down." She picked up a chair from behind one of the benches and calmly seated herself in front of him. Then she went on. "You don't think a nervous old lady like that would have stayed in the convent another moment if she knew there was sufficient ammunition in the cellar to blow the whole house to pieces, do you?"

"I suppose you've told the police all this?"

"I thought you might like to confirm it. I should hate to do you an injustice."

"You can go to hell, then. I can only be punished for one murder, so yours won't make any difference."

"You forget that I am not a nervous old woman lying helpless in bed while a cowardly and vicious young thug stifles her with a pillow."

“*Your* death will be even more unpleasant than hers was,” snarled Chassett. “You weren’t very clever to come here alone when I’ve got *this*”—he snatched from its bracket on the wall a large, extremely ugly-looking chisel—“to help me out.” He lunged towards her. More quickly than seemed possible in such an old and apparently frail woman, Dame Beatrice skipped from her chair and overturned it in front of his legs just as the inspector and his sergeant burst in at the door.

“So it is goodbye,” said Sister St. Elmo, giving Dame Beatrice her hand. It was the school dinner hour and the whole Community was there to wish the traveller Godspeed. Dame Beatrice made her farewells. She had already said goodbye to the secular staff and the two old ladies, for Mrs. Wilks was back in the convent once more. It fell to the oldest Sister to say the last word. Two pairs of brilliant black eyes in two lined and ancient faces summed each other up with sympathetic understanding.

“We shall meet in heaven,” asserted old Sister Ignatius with finality. Dame Beatrice said gently that she would look forward to the reunion.

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.